

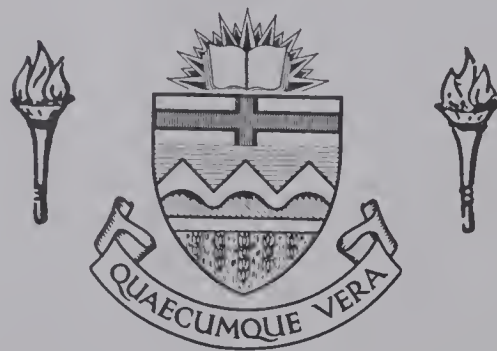
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THE RAIN-ORB

by



ALLAN SHUTE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE

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ABSTRACT

This fairy-tale tells the story of young Morgan's climb from oppression at the Souther Shore of Tilantes to the Kingship of Gore, all in the space of a week.

the rain-orb is but a core-sample of the real rain-orb, the magic pill of existence, the rainbow of reality.

A splendid time is guaranteed for all.

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled the rain-orb, submitted by Allen Shute in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

The golden fish circling so languidly in their
great bowl of light -- they are hardly aware
that their world, the field of their journeys,
is a curved one . . .

Lawrence Durrell

Balthazar .

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part one:

I carry my eye
wherever I go
so I can see
all over...

Tim Lander

morgan & mary

One
time there
was upon a
land, rather an island,
a little boy named Morgan
who had golden hair, blue eyes
and a cute button nose right plunk
in the middle of his fat smiling face
which was smiling such a smile because Morgan was
just about as happy as any other little boy would
be, were he, like Morgan, Old John the Woodcutter's third son.

"Being Old John the Woodcutter's third son isn't too bad a deal" thought Morgan to himself, " . . . or at least, not too bad a deal this morning."

With his back against a poolside poplar, he was sitting, one elbow propped upon an upsidedown oaken waterbucket. In his right hand rested a rattle of pebbles.

Like a gentleman of leisure, Morgan would randomly thumb a pebble into shooting position and snap it into the still backwater of the little creek that trickled by to the sea. Then he would watch the splashborn ringlets grow, one within the other, to intoxicate the reflection of the farbank reeds and waterlilies. And the scrambled image, after a lingering embrace with chaos, would always jump smartly up to compose into orderly inverted patterns once again.

At this point, Morgan would toss another pebble in.

"Yessir," he smiled. "I do believe I have a quiet day ahead of me." He paused to snatch a passing fly out of the air. A late-autumn bluebottle, it buzzed and battered against the thick walls of his hand. Morgan was going to examine it out of idle curiosity when he discovered, to his amazement, that he really could not take a good look at it without hurting it.

So he let it go.

It soared and dipped, lurched and rattled out of sight.

These pleasant pastimes kept Morgan warm in the chilly wind that warned of winter's soon approach. This second last Saturday in November promised to be a day out of the ordinary for Morgan: a holiday! And Morgan who was a working lad, not a gentleman of leisure, always enjoyed his days off.

The events that led up to this unusual situation had come about rather unexpectedly. It was only 8:00 a.m. of the day before when a golden-brown leaf fishtailed down onto the ledger two inches from the nose of Old John the Woodcutter. Frowning, he adjusted his wire-rimmed bifocals and curiously picked up the offending bit of matter.

"Trash!" he muttered and crumpled it up.

He had just tossed the mangled leaf into the wire wastebasket when another leaf, scarlet this time, made the same fatal mistake and came tiddling down PLUNK into Old John's private inkwell.

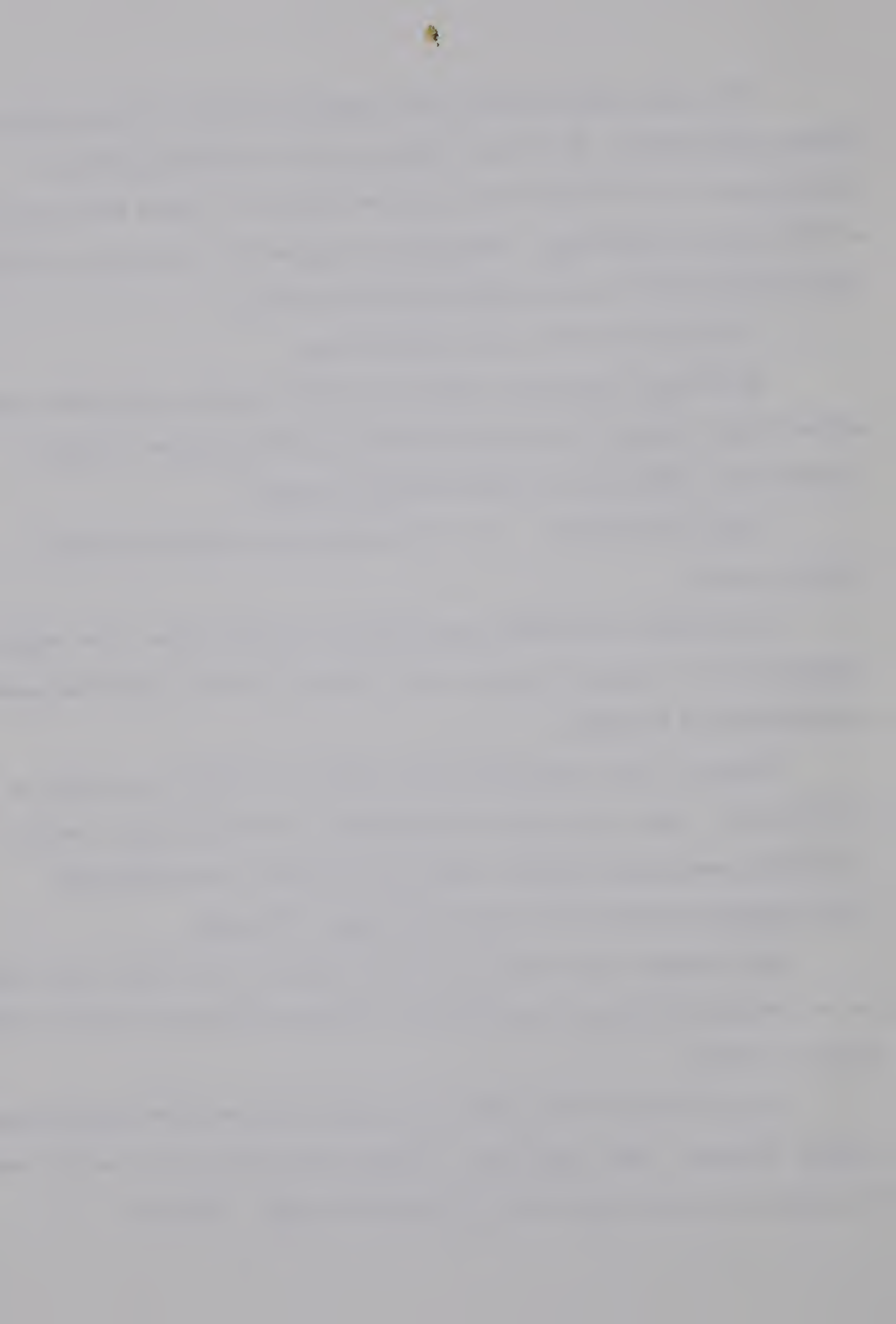
"Whut the Sam Hill . . .?" He snatched the inky leaf out and stomped upon it.

Then another and another and another, each one either ripe yellow, toasted green or orangeade orange, came crashing down and around the head and shoulders of Old John.

Finally, after smouldering for a minute, he looked accusingly up into the sky. "Thar's the rub!" he exploded. And when he jumped up, he knocked his monogrammed leather swivelchair onto the lawn behind him. "Thet goddaimed noosunce of a tree is a-buggin' mah ass!"

Sure enough, the shady linden that loafed over Old John's desk for the better part of the year was serenely dropping multicolored leaves right, left and centre.

"Mogan!" bellowed Old John at the top of his executive-length lungs. "MOGAN! Goddaim! Where izzat boy? Morgan, get yo ass in gear an com' on out heeya to yor ole pappy this sonafabitchin minnit! Y'hear?"



Within half a shake of a whip, Morgan and the ancient gray mare that belonged to Old John's lumber company trotted out onto the worn carpet in front of the big shiny desk. Morgan fidgetted with the curry-comb in his hand while Old Tess blinked against the light of the new-born day.

"Feast yo evvaluvvin eyebones on theyat!" growled Old John. He rapped a silver-streaked leaf down on the glass topping of his desk in front of them. Stomachs rumbling, Morgan and Old Tess looked at it with wonder.

"This dad-blamed had bettah stop o' Ah'm goan bankruppit fo' shure!"

Stepping back a pace, Old John pointed a ring-studded finger at the guilty tree. "Thet tree's goan to drive me outen the lummerin trade, iffен it don't quit all this Novembah nonsense!"

Pacing back and forth in front of Morgan's hand-me-down navyblue overcoat and Old Tess's lacklustre eyes, he continued, "Producktividdy needs be increasit a hunnert psent as wintah is a-comin on! We gotta make them ole ainds meet afore the fust snowfa! Thet will be AW!"

Noon found Morgan and Old Tess straining to budge Old John's rickety timberwagon, heavy with an extra load of logs, up the most tiring hill in the Timberwold. They were making a delivery to the shipyard and a delivery to the mill.

"Erg!" grunted Morgan. "Just a few feet more to the top! It's all downhill to Tubbersport after this hill . . . Emf!"

Then out of the clear and the calmness of the blue, a violet thunderbolt split the air KER-RASH around their ears and swatted the forest with an angry thunderclap. Old Tess's eyes bulged out of their red sockets for the last time. Collapsing then and there of a ruptured aorta, she let go the load.

The wagon started rolling down the hill despite Morgan's best efforts to stop it. Finally, when he had to, he jumped--just in time to see Old Tess being dragged backwards, harness and all. The heavy-duty chains--the hobbles, tugs and shackles--clinked faster and faster, clanked as the wagon gathered speed.

"What can I do?" wailed Morgan to the rocks and stones.

Gravel, humpy roots and jagged rocks tore across the cloth sides of the gray mare. Her limpnecked head followed along, bobbling and jolting.

Then the wagon, unable to round a corner, pitched off into the ditch and upended. The weight of Old John's prize pinelogs levered Old Tess into the sky between two wooden shafts where she hung twitching. There in the air she stood, a grim parody of life, unpained by this final indignity. She was, despite appearances, quite dead.

Morgan spent the rest of the day dickering with the foreman at the Glue Factory. That gentleman did not want to travel all the way up to the High Way just to lug Old Tess back down to the melting pots. He tried to get Morgan to do it, but finally gave in after the fair price of two cents had been agreed upon.

And needless to say, when Morgan arrived home late that evening hungry and haggard, Old John raved and spluttered at the sad news.

"A lightnin' boat? This ti-um of yee-ar? Doan tell Old John stories, boy! Yoo wuz racin her, by caspar! Yoo wuz racin her!" He paused and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Now git to bed afore I clobber yoo!"

No one slept most of that night as Old John paced the creaky floor of his bedroom, swore and ran his thick fingers through his greasy black hair.

And so early the following morning, the very Saturday that Morgan was down at the creek fetching his mother water, Old John trooped out of the cottage door outfitted in his finest black suit. Before him stumbled two sleepy-eyed scarecrows in tweed, Morgan's two elder brothers.

"Fawther, rilly!" chirped Eugene, the eldest brother. "This is rawther untowahd, to say the least . . ."

"Shet yo mouf!" snorted Old John.

"Yas, fawther, really . . . er, I mean 'rilly' . . ." Benedict was the next in line. "This early moaning wising, to say the least, is foah the buhds!"

FWAP!

Old John's broad hand corrected Benedict's posture considerably.

"Screw them birds! Jist yoo keep on a-walkin and mind yoo don't step outa line! Honest Goniff doan like to see no slouch-assed mumbles lak yooseff."

Around the caragana bush and up the weary path to town trod the threesome. Amidst many a gripe and grumble, they hurried all the way to get a good seat at the Tubbersport Horse and Harness Auction which, to

Old John, was the social event of the week.

Morgan smiled and tossed in another pebble. He leaned back and tilted his tricorner hat over his eyes. As aimless as flies, thoughts buzzed around and around in his head.

"It is about time I got a day off! I worked like a dwarf all day yesterday and missed two meals. But I do wish I went into town with Old John and my brothers. A candy or two from the grocery would go down rather well. . . .

"Hmmm? What kind of horse will they buy, I wonder? I'd like a big black shiny one like the Elmersons have. A really fast one. But they wouldn't get one like that. Not for lumbering . . .

"I wonder if the old lady would much mind if I went in and asked for another peanut butter and banana sandwich? Hmmm, I wonder . . ."

"MORGAN!"

It was his mother shouting out the screendoor. "Would you hurry up and bring me the water," she hollered, "instead of lazing about catching flies! I've been waiting in here for that water for the last half-hour!"

Morgan jumped up and dipped the bucket into the clearness of the stream.

"And would you take out the ashes before I start baking?"

Morgan found himself gritting his teeth.

"And your father said for you to split the firewood beside the stable!"

"There goes the day," muttered Morgan under his breath. "Isn't it always like that? Just when you begin to get a bit comfortable . . ."

And as he trudged up the path to the little cottage, the water from the heavy bucket splashed all over his left leg.

The day passed very slowly for Morgan.

The late afternoon found Morgan dwarfed beside a steadily growing pile of stovewood. Just as he was raising his axe above his head to deliver another tired swing, a flurry of mixed sounds came filtering through the trees. There was merry laughter, slurred shouts, brisk hoofbeats and the creak and rattle of a carriage.

"Now who could that be?" Morgan asked himself.

The noise grew until finally a black little filly trotted proudly around the caragana bush into the yard, drawing a highly polished victoria overflowing with three flushed and happy customers of the Tubbersport Horse and Harness Auction.

"Oh my goodness!"

Morgan dropped his axe and ran up to the carriage. He carefully traced the clean lines of the mahogany panels with his finger as his father and brothers lurched around inside, singing and shouting. The racy smell of the new leather reins thrilled in Morgan's nostrils. He happily gripped the felly of the narrow-spoked wheel in both hands and hugged it to his body.

"Get offa the wheel an run fetch yo maw, boy!" roared Old John.

Morgan dodged a cuff on the ear and jumped off the wheel to go call his mother. But the screendoor banged and there she was hustling out towards them, rubbing her floury hands in her apron.

"This is all very fine," she objected with an amazed smile, "but how are we ever going to pay for it?"

"Now don't yoo würry yo pretty li'l ole haid bout things like thet, Martha!" Old John laughed hoarsely. "Com'on up and about fo a ryed. Euge, quit lookin like a bump and get on down an hep you maw up afore I belt yoo!"

Eagerly, Morgan awaited his turn to crawl up onto the buggy. With Eugene holding her hand, she oohed and ahhed her way in beside her husband. Jumping up after her, Eugene took up a position on the running board.

"Less go, Benny boy," ordered Old John. "show yo maw how this mustang cain move out!"

Benedict cracked his whip.

"Take the bread out of the oven when it's done, Morgan," his mother called out to him.

Then the victoria, mushrooming with an excess of people, hurtled blindly off around the corner of the caragana and disappeared in a cloud of tears.

In the fading light of late autumn, Morgan stood all alone, wiping his nose on his sleeve. Then he asked himself solemnly, "Now how am I ever going to haul lumber with a set-up like that?"

But no early winter nighttime noise answered him.

The question was still unanswered when Old John awoke the following hangover. Lying twisted and limp on his Sunday morning bed, he summoned Morgan in from the stable where he was brushing and feeding the new horse. Stumbling into the morguelike gloom of his parents' room, Morgan finally picked his way to Old John's bedside.

"Mogan . . ." Old John moaned through almost lifeless lips. He tried not to move as movement brought a wash of pain and dizziness down upon him. "Mogan . . . Take whut's left in mah purse an run into town an see if ole Honest Goniff has a good ole wukhorse fo aw lummerin. Somehow, Ah doan think the new horse'll tolrate pullin the lummerwagon . . ."

"She won't," confirmed Morgan. "I tried to get her into Old Tess's halter, but she wouldn't even go for that!"

Old John lifted a shaking white hand to wave Morgan away.

"Ya well . . . Do as Ah say, boy, and take the purse . . ."

"Where is it?"

"Ooooooh," groaned the sick man. "It shud be raht on the chayar with mah paints."

The purse was with the pants, but the pants were not on the chair. They were sprawled across the floor by the side of the bed. Taking a light leather bag from one of the pockets, Morgan folded the pants and laid them over the back of the chair.

"There doesn't seem to be more than six cents in it," he said, showing the pennies on the flat of his hand to Old John.

"Ahhh, trundle you lazy ass outen the house an get a good bargain! Doan yoo worry bout nuffin fancy. An wait! Doan yoo come on back heeyar with you hains empty an candy from the groc'ry sto smeared all round you mouf, y'hear?"

Then Old John rolled over and his wife grunted. And with a "Yessir", Morgan raced out of the penumbra of Old John's Sunday morning hangover and scampered out the door and up the sunny path to town.

Morgan was happily tripping down the final hill that led into Tubbersport when, to his absolute horror, he spied a white-haired old man strutting briskly up the Low Way towards him.

"Cops," gasped Morgan. "It's Flesherton Costick." The boy ducked behind the handiest roadside bush and waited. "I wonder if he saw me?" Morgan peeked through the leaves to see the man breaking into a rigid trot.

"Morgan!" cried Flesherton Costick. "Morgan! Come out! Come out! I see you. I want to have a Word with you!"

Flesherton Costick's big broad face appeared around the edge of the bush and frowned down on Morgan. A gold-filled leftfront tooth threatened untold horrors.

"Have you learned your Catechism for the Coming Week?" quivered the face with schnauzerlike solemnity. "Like a Good Little Boy?" Flesherton Costick was still breathing hard from his little run.

"Umm . . ." began Morgan. "Now let me see . . ." He was desperately stalling for time. "Ah, now how does it go? 'Beware . . . beware . . . of a dwarf . . . that is bowlegged . . . and . . .'"

"Morgan!" trembled Flesherton Costick as he straightened the cleaner's bob in the breast pocket of his grayflannel suit. He shook his finger in Morgan's face. "You have not been studying your Catechism, have you?"

Morgan shook his head sadly no.

"You've been Catching Flies again, have you not?"

Morgan nodded his head sadly yes.

"Catching Flies is an Idle Pastime as well as Being a Filthy Habit," quaked the unblemished white face. "It leads Directly Down the Freeway to Perdition and Loss of Credit Rating. Did you know that you can come to be Psychologically Dependent upon such a Vice?" He paused, his lower lip a-quiver.

As a nod or a shake was equally incriminating, Morgan just shrugged his shoulders respectfully. "Catechism is worse," he giggled to himself, but he blushed immediately with shame at the thought.

"Now lend an Ear, Morgan," warned Flesherton Costick as he adjusted his black-rimmed spectacles. "I'm going to repeat It for the Last Time!"

With a self-effacing cough, he began to chant:

Beware, Beware All
 Of a Bowlegged Dwarf,
 A Dwarf that's Tall
 Or a Dwarf that's Short;
 But Sooner Trust A Dwarf
 Than the Half-Dwarf Man:
 His Bottle-Green Heart
 Is Impossible to Scan;
 He'll Smile like a Townsman
 And Laugh like You and Me,
 But the Half-Dwarf Man
 Will Drown You In The Sea!"

Morgan nodded his head in time to the words and wondered what Flesherton Costick would look like smiling and laughing like he did in the rhyme, but it was impossible to feature.

"Also: Virtue is Its Own Fringe Benefit. Remember Mr. Alleyne Frogoni's Sterling Example: Success & Virtue, Virtue & Success!"

Morgan nodded.

"You'll Not Fall by the Wayscales?"

Morgan shook his head until his brains rattled.

"And I'll not ever catch you Frequenting a Pub, Tavern or Beverage Room, will I?"

At this, Morgan knew he should shake his head fiercely.

Flesherton Costick patted Morgan on top of his fiercely shaking head. "Now that's a Good Little Boy. You toddle on your Way now. And Remember: Only Think Pure Thoughts! No Thinking About You-Know-What!"

Morgan shook his head again as a parting gesture and then ran off imagining all the things that You-Know-What could possibly be.

When he finally arrived in town, Morgan found the Horse Auction closed, of course, as it was Sunday; but Honest Goniff could still be seen through his dingy frontwindow counting out piles and piles of gold and silver pieces that had come in the previous day. Morgan rapped on the window-pane.

Starting as if he had been shot, Honest Goniff froze protectively over his money. Then slowly, very slowly, he peered up, gold canine teeth a-glinting, to find Morgan's round face framed fatly in the window.

"What do you want?" snapped Honest Goniff.

"I'm the woodcutter's boy and we need a workhorse badly. Our last one died."

"Don't have none!" growled Honest Goniff and returned to his double-entry bookkeeping. "Nothing left!" he shouted at his feather pen. "Come back next Saturday!"

"But don't you even know where one would be, Sir?" Morgan asked fretfully. "I've got the money with me . . ."

The glint softened for a fraction of a second in Honest Goniff's eye. He stopped his ciphering. Then with exaggerated motions he busily

resumed. "Did Old John come into town with you, Morgan?" he asked with what seemed little concern.

"Nossir. He's home sick."

"Well, well, well," chuckled Honest Goniff. "Ain't that too bad!" Tombstone teeth whitened his perpetual smile as his beady eyes bored out of the depths of his skull-shaped head. Morgan's spine chilled as a thought struck him: those horsetrading eyes seemed to see not only everything before them, but everything up to that moment and everything after. Then the feeling passed. "Just how much money do you have, Morgan lad?"

"Six cents, Sir." He waved the purse before the dirty window. "Right here."

"I've got a good mule out back," murmured Honest Goniff as he rolled up a yellowed newspaper and thrust it into his tiny potbellied stove, "but I wouldn't take less than a dime for it. Let me tell you something: Glue Factory offered me twelve, but I'd have to take it over myself. They'll beat you down to half that price if they have to fetch it over themselves."

"Isn't six enough?" wailed Morgan.

"No! Go away! Lemme be!"

Morgan thought convulsively for a silent minute. His fingers fondled the jackknife in his pantspocket. It was shiny and all its gear would fold neatly into the bone handle. Morgan had saved for months to ransom it from Honest Shackrun's big frontwindow. "But without a work-horse," repeated Morgan over and over, "I can't very well go home. Old John'd kill me, or hide me, to say the least!" He rapped on the pane of

glass again. "I've got a really good knife here. I paid seven cents for it alone. It has three blades, a spoon, a fork, a corkscrew and a can-opener on it. And a leather punch."

Honest Goniff looked balefully up. With a scowl darkening across his ever-smiling face, he seemed to say, "Are you still here?" But instead, he shuffled to the door, opened it a crack and snatched the knife away with a greasy hand, a hand too large for his wiry wrist. Turning it over and over, he examined it closely. Then he thrust it back sneering amiably. "Not worth nothing to me. Couldn't get two cents for it over to Frogoni's Pawn." But just as Morgan's fingers were closing around the bone handle, the old horsetrader snatched it back out of reach. "Let's see your six cents!" Morgan obediently handed over the purse. Closing the door directly in Morgan's face, Honest Goniff withdrew into the darkness.

Morgan waited and waited; and after a good five minutes, he finally asked through the window, "Well, have you made up your mind yet, sir?" A stony silence hung on the glass.

"Hello?" sang out Morgan. He checked to see if Honest Goniff was still in there. He was and with a glare that could chill a steaming cup of tea, the old horsetrader answered curtly, "What do you take me for? The Charity? This ain't enough!"

"Oh my heavens," exclaimed Morgan with exasperation. "What more do you want?"

"Do you have any rings, watches or personal effects?"

"I do have a ring," admitted Morgan, "but I've had it for as long as I can remember. It's got a little picture of a linden on it."

The door creaked open again and the unusual hand appeared to pull Morgan's ring-finger in through the crack.

"Ahhh," grated Honest Goniff's voice, "your finger is all green around it! It's only copper! Ain't worth nothing to me!"

But worth it or not, the ring was tugged off in the safety of the horsetrading shack. Morgan's finger, stripped of its linden ring, came rocketting back out to join the rest of him. Again the door slammed shut.

This time Morgan did not wait a full five minutes, perhaps only four. After he had rapped and knocked unsuccessfully on the window until his knuckles began to redden, he started thumping on the door.

Silence.

So Morgan twisted the doorknob and pushed the door inwards. A safety chain prevented him from opening it any wider than a crack.

"What do you want now?" snarled the voice from within.

"Is the donkey mine now?"

"It's a mule!"

"Is the mule mine now?"

"Throw in the pouch and it's a deal!"

"But that's my father's purse," objected Morgan. "I can't give away other people's property just like that!"

"It's a pouch!"

"But that's my father's pouch!"

After a violent rattling of chains, the door flew wide open with a bang. There in the shadows crouched Honest Goniff's gnarled waste of a body draped in greasy cottons. His right hand was buried deep within a baggy pocket and his left, under Morgan's nose, threatened in a fist.

"Listen kid," he rumbled, "I don't have to sell you no mule! I'm not even open and you come whining after me--'Sell me a mule! Sell me a mule!' Who do you take me for? Big-hearted Charlie? I could lose my license! And I'm telling you that for nothing!"

Old John's orders echoed in Morgan's memory.

"Okay," he said quietly, "it's a deal . . ."

The door banged shut for a third and final time. And as Morgan was leaving, a voice crackled over the clink of gold, silver and copper within, "I'm losing money on the deal! But go ahead: rob me! The mule is out back. Now get it off my property before I call a cop!"

Morgan ran around the back of the shack to feast his eyes on the bargain that he had just picked up. Rounding the rear corner, he stopped dead in his tracks with a gasp. His hand over his mouth, he recoiled one unbelieving step and stared.

Leaning feebly against the unpainted shiplap back of the shack was an old wreck of an animal or rather, an old wreck of something that resembled an animal or better yet, an old wreck of something that used to resemble an animal.

"Oh my poor backside . . .," wheezed Morgan.

There in front of him trembled the thinnest, sickest and mangiest-looking creature that he had ever before laid eyes upon. The poor beast's ribs jutted out into the cruel wind through bagging heaps of aged skin. About its head shimmered a halo of friendly bluebottles.

The only sign of life in the mule, if it could be called life, was an intermittent phthisic shiver aggravated by a mysterious rattle that seemed

to start in the throat and radiate outwards in every direction until the whole sorry frame stood clattering and clacking.

Morgan stared at the relic until his eyes began to mist over. A glossy picture of the mustang came irresistibly to mind and made him groan. "What a bargain," snorted Morgan half aloud. "What a dodo bargain! Just wait 'til Old John lays his eyes on this old gray heap . . .!"

Walking from one end of it to the other, Morgan was amazed how an animal could still support itself on such antique legs, wall or no wall.

"Dare I try to wake it up," wondered Morgan, "or do you think it would fall over on its head?"

But just then, the old mule coughed itself awake. It repeatedly blinked as it became more and more aware of Morgan's presence. Then it yawned luxuriously in his surprised face.

"Perhaps there's more life in it than I expected . . .," thought Morgan. "H-hello there, old mule," he greeted it. "I'm your new owner."

At this, the mule sniffed Morgan's sleeve very carefully. Then it stepped back and looked him over from head to toe. Morgan felt foolish just standing there staring back into the inquisitive face of the mule, so he picked a bouquet of grass and held it out to the nose before him.

With a sideways motion of its head, the beast snaffled the grass from Morgan's fingers and began to munch it contentedly. After it had finished swallowing, the mule burped. It shook quite doggily then, flubbering its lips like a horse. Looking Morgan squarely in the eye, it seemed to say, "Very well, the bargain is complete now. Take me home."

So Morgan searched around on the ground for a piece of rope or even a piece of string for a lead, but there was nothing. Only empty winebottles and wooden softdrink crates seemed to thrive in the quack-grass behind the auctioneer's shack. Morgan turned around empty-handed and found, to his surprise that the mule had been following him all the while.

"Maybe I won't need a rope," smiled Morgan. He walked backwards five paces and stopped. The old mule put one crumbly hoof before the other and shambled up to where Morgan was waiting.

"Hey, you're a smart old mule, aren't you?" he laughed and scratched it behind the ears. "Do you want to follow me home?"

"eeYAUGH!" answered the mule.

And so Morgan discovered that "eeYAUGH!" meant "yes" among many other things. Among the many other things that the old mule wanted to do, it nonetheless wanted to follow him home, because it did.

The long walk home was interrupted by frequent stops as the mule felt the need to rest, graze a bit or drink from a roadside pond or stream. Instead of tiring her out, the journey seemed to strengthen the old mule. Occasionally it trotted along quite briskly, and by the time the pair had reached the heart of the Yokelberry farming district, the mule's eyes had begun to shine.

Morgan thought that it looked almost presentable.

"Lardy me," came a voice from the side of the road. "Oy know wit's bin a bad yir fer mosquitows, boot Oy din't bleive it til noo!"

Morgan's head pivotted around to see a fat blotchy face leering over the splitrail fence that defined the potatofield on the shadowing side of the road. A gurgle froze in his throat.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed to himself. "It never rains but it pours. I knew I should've taken the High Way home even though it meant going through town."

There behind the fence hunched a grisly old hag chewing busily. She sunk into her arms knotted over the top rail and set about sizing up the situation before her. Her one eye darted and scurried around in its socket like a waterbeetle.

All of a sudden, her warped mouth paused to spit out a nod of tobacco. And in a trice, her black toothless smirk was back in business.

"Um Oy spyking ter me wee chum Morgan or um Oy just spyking ter a post what fivers 'im?"

"Er, hello Mary . . .," began Morgan. "I mean Mrs. Wortle, hehheh. Digging spuds, I see. Is it a good crop this year?"

Ignoring his question, Mary Wortle pointed at the mule and shrieked, "Ewhere innurth did ye coom by that precious pice of foorniachure? Oy din't know the Glue Fectery wez hevving a fire sale!"

"I'll have you know, Mrs. Wortle," replied Morgan, raising his chin a mite, "that this is a rare specimen of mule only to be found in the Hammer Hills of Nortamer."

"Oowit's a rayar spessymun, Oy'll grunt ye that," she cackled. "Oy've nuvver seed the loike!"

"It's a smart mule and understands everything I say," retorted Morgan. Then he added, a bit hurt, "Besides, it's been sick!"

"And it ken wroite its owen name, Oy funky too! Oy spowse ye cowl it Doctor Smart Ass! Hee hee! 'Physiciown, heo thoysof,' Oy owais sye! Hoo hoo hoo!"

The wizened skinflap over Mary's left eye twitched quirkishly.

"Nooo," drawled Morgan after a dark pause. "I call her Mary after whom she favours most. Let's go, Mary!"

"eeYAUGH!" laughed the mule in the potato-picker's face. Tossing up her head, Mary the mule trotted off down the road after Morgan.

"Oy sye ye'll coom ter a bad end, Master John's Son, with owl yer cheek!" shouted Mary Wortle. She shook a dirt-caked potato after the two. "Mark me warts, ye will!"

But Morgan never let on that he heard.

No one was waiting on the doorstep to welcome Mary to her new home. In fact, no one was even pecking from behind the kitchenwindow curtains. Old John and Martha, Eugene and Benedict were all still in bed recuperating from the late night they had invested impressing Main Street's Upper End by leaving their mustang-and-victoria outside The Cock on Walk, Tubbersport's finest pub, for a sufficient length of time.

So Mary was led unheralded into the humble stable. As Morgan was installing her next to the mustang, the racier beast stopped munching and turned around to see what all the commotion was about. The mustang looked once, then twice and its mouthful of straw fell in bits and pieces onto the dirty wooden floor.

Mary briefly looked over the stable before she systematically set about scrounging up stray oat kernels hidden away in the corners of the manger.

It was not until Morgan had filled the manger with oats and replaced the sack in the corner that he noticed a horsy pout on the mustang's silky black face. The horse, holding its nose in the air, refused to share in the meal before her. Mary, on the other hand, made short work of her half and then began on the mustang's.

"I'm sure you two will make very good friends before long," said Morgan, hopefully tugging at his blond cowlick. "Well, I have to go and look into fixing up a cart or something for Mary here . . ."

And with that, he stumbled out of the stable to let the social situation unravel into tangles.

The greasy smell of fried chicken did not dampen Morgan's enthusiasm in the slightest. Sawing, pounding and chiselling, he hovered around an antique wheelbarrow beside Old John's big empty desk in the front yard.

He had found the wheelbarrow in the garbagedump half a mile from the cottage and dragged it home in the hope of converting it to a cart for Mary. Although the iron-bound wheel was rusty-red and the sideboards were rotting around the nails, Morgan could see in it a gleaming glory of a buggy like Old John's new victoria.

"Morr-gannn! Suppp-per!" singsang Martha out the kitchenwindow.
"Come and get it!"

"Just a minute, maw," answered Morgan, too busy to look up. "I want to get these shafts on the handles before it's too dark to work."

"Suit yourself. Starve!" quoth she and clapped the window to.

Picking their teeth with ivory toothpicks, Eugene and Benedict idled by as Morgan tried with little success to back the mule in between the two shafts that were once simple wheelbarrow handles.

"Come on, Mary," begged Morgan. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Come on."

Despite Morgan's best efforts, Mary stood stiff-legged and mulestill. This caused his elder brothers to chuckle and giggle. And from time to time, they would politely cover their mouths with white-gloved hands to suppress a gaping yawn, a greasy belch or both.

"Come on, Mary. We haven't got all night!"

Straightening his tophat, Eugene piped up, "It rilly is too much to expect of any awnimal, regodless of quawlity, to be seen hawnessed to that extrawdnry conveyawnce you caw a cawt."

"Yaws, really . . . er, rilly," chimed in Benedict, straightening his tophat.

"I sye, Benedictus," observed Eugene, "is it nought rawther chawming though, in a pawstoral sawt of wye, to despawt oneself o'er hill and dale . . . in a wheelbarrow?"

"Rawther, Eugenius, I sye."

"But then agine, a myule is so mundine! Benedictus, old fellow, let us fetch the mustang-awnd-victowia awnd take a brief rawmble down Mine Strit wye. Perhops, we cawn get up a gime of bridge with the fellows."

"So mundane . . . er, mundine," echoed Benedict as he followed his elder brother to the stable. "Yaws, a rawmble. A gime. Lettuce dew!"

Morgan was still trying to shove Mary backwards between the forking shafts when the victoria rolled smoothly out onto the grass.

"Remembaw, Morganus old chop," called out Eugene, "if the myule will nought go to the cawt, then the cawt, of necessity, must go to the myule. Ta ta!"

"Pip pip!" added Benedict.

The whip cracked and a silvery ripple of laughter floated lightly onto the night air to linger long after the mustang-and-victoria had rounded the caragana bush and jounced up the path to town.

"Why didn't I think of that?" mumbled Morgan under his breath. Walking past Mary to the wheelend of the barrow, he murmured, "A body gets flustered when those two wiseacres start in on a body!"

Morgan turned around to push the cart. To his amazement, he beheld Mary standing patiently between the shafts. She had taken care, though, to walk in frontwards. Instead of being behind, the cart was before the mule.

"Well," her eyes seemed to say, "don't just stand there! Buckle me in or whatever you do!"

"Why not?" he shrugged and tightened the cinch around her middle.

To Morgan's profound delight, Mary promptly trotted up the length of the yard, turned neatly about and came trotting back. The cart trundled smoothly along before her.

"Boy, oh boy!" Morgan began to chatter. "Are we ever going to have fun tomorrow!" Then he joyfully fell to unharnessing her.

He was still excited after he had led Mary back into the stable. Filling the feedtrough with more oats in case either animal was hungry during the night, he hummed and whistled. And as he brushed Mary down, his thoughts dwelt on the morrow.

"I can hardly wait to get out there on that open High Way, Mary. Zoom! Zoar! Boy, oh boy!"

In the cottage he gobbled down a meal of cold chicken, cold parsnips and cold mashed potatoes. Tomorrow could not come soon enough, so he rushed off to bed, the top dresser drawer in his brothers' empty bedroom, and drifted instantly off into a world of pleasant dreams.

White paved roads
 rushed effortlessly under him,
 Cool wisps kissed his cheeks,
 caressed his hair.
 Roadside playing cards,
 ditch-bound tyrants--
 traffic signs and people--
 flipped up before him
 to fall flat-faced
 forever behind
 as he flew madly past.

Unnoticed, his body, the cart and Mary
 melted wondrously together,
 galloped all the faster
 for unity.

Suddenly a black mountain
 loomed,
 threatening an iron fist.

But sprouting wings,
 Morgan-cart-Mary
 caught the wind
 and soared aloft.

Far below on the craggy blackness
 faded a vision
 of jagged mouths shouting noiselessly,
 of gnarled wooden fingers grasping greedily,
 of Old John and Flesherton Costick,

Honest Goniff and Mary Wortle,
 of the mustang and Martha,

Eugene and Benedict

all

dancing slowly in a vicious circle

all

casting angry potatoes skyward.

Rearing in the air,

Morgan struck out towards the white clouds

that floated lazily

over blue and diamond-sparkled seas.

Flying,

flying,

flying . . .

monday morning

The freshness of the breeze played with Morgan's hair and wrapped around his face. The cart jounced and clanked along the path, up the hill and across the meadow. The woodsman's axe rattled merrily in the bottom of the wheelbarrow-box.

There was something about rushing headlong into the open air . . . It was as good as his dream the night before. "Or even better," thought Morgan, "because I really didn't expect Mary's warm breath on the back of my neck!"

Morgan's joy lessened not a whit when he imagined how Eugene and Benedict would sneer and joke if they could only see him rolling along in this set-up. "Ah yes," he replied to his two brothers, who were at that moment home in bed, "not only is my cart easier to park than the mustang-and-victoria, but I enjoy an unobstructed view of the road ahead. No horse's behind bouncing up and down under my nose!" And smiling, Morgan could see Eugene and Benedict begging on bended knee for just one little ride up the road and back.

"Ah yes, the morning . . ." sighed Morgan as he bounced happily along. The clankety-bunk of the iron wheel on gravel wound around his mind and he forgot that soon enough he would be sweating down huge oaks and pines in the Timberwold and granting them off to the Tubbersport Shipyards on the Eastershore. Humming, he began to think the most pleasant of thoughts.

"Sometimes," he mused to himself, "I wish I were the only person on this island. There's always somebody making fun of me or telling me what to do. And that Flesherton Costick." But then, blushing from ear to ear at this somewhat selfish thought, he quickly added, "Or I wish that this island were so big that other people could live on it too and I wouldn't have to see them unless I wanted to."

The island was small. To a rook flying amongst the ice-cream clouds over the Sea of Stoarm, the island looked much like an avocado, and to a fisherman bobbing up and down in his boat out at sea, it resembled a fierce dragon swimming into the Sea of Frostenforth. The rook and the fisherman would have to agree, however, that the stem of the avocado and the head of the dragon both jutted north into black, ice-capped waves, into the cold, clean wind which, for half of the year, would rise, sweep over and rule the Isle of Tilantes.

"Ah, I remember the day I sailed around the island with Old Murdoch . . ." A salty wind seemed to blow up and the wheelbarrow-box melted into the rising and falling prow of Old Murdoch's fishing yawl. The nets were drawn in and Morgan was cuddled up to a newly-born kitten. The wind whipped his hair and the spray tingled his cheeks and lips. Old Murdoch was heading into the rough northern waves, rounding a high white shoulder of cliff.

It was at that supreme moment that Morgan beheld the Castle of Iryntor, high, majestic and imposing. The home of King John the Good, this fortress was enthroned upon the loftiest, most jagged peak of cloud-crowded Iryntor. And the flags flapped raggedly.

After Old Murdoch had turned his craft south and homeward, and the castle had disappeared from sight, the sun vanished behind the incoming clouds. Under this dark and purpling ceiling, the Black Forest loomed up more sinister than it was. Even the dismal gray beaches of Westershire seemed to shrink before the twisted crowd of trees that struggled against the horizon's waning light.

"Splunter ant oons!" cracked a voice from the aft. It was Old Murdoch at the rudder. "This is as close to the tivvil forest as I ivver hope to be. A man's lost in there, shertain!" Tall, fair and wiry, the old fisherman banged his pipe against the hull of the boat. The eye patch over his right eye seemed a black hole in his head. "I tell ye, Morgan, I've hear't many a yarn concerning this werry forest thut'd prickle yer neck for a week. Got pless my soul, and they're all true!" He lit his pipe and a hint of aromatic smoke stood for a moment against the chilling sea-wind. He nodded his wind-battered head once more at the boy and the cat. "Ay, a mate oncet tolt me thut he'd behelt with his two eyen a sight whut turnt his hair white as a mains'l overnight. And his hair was white whun he tolt me, got tammy soul if it wan't. He says to me, 'Murdoch, you've hear't o' the dwarts, han't ye? The giant-dwarfs?' And I says, 'Shertain, Jack I have, but they're all shildern's prattle.' 'Nay,' says he, 'I've seen one whilst coming home from The Pig's Bladder at the edge of the Black Forest. Big, broat and tark-green he was, look ye, and must've weigh't a goot eighteen stone. And the sight o' it turnt me hair white as a mains'l overnight!' he says to me, betammed if he tin't.

I've never seen a hair o' one ant I likely never will, so there's no sense a-scaring ye, Morgan lad." Old Murdoch pointed his pipe stem at the Black Forest. "But I've never hear't tell o' a man whut's gone in there and been seen again, tead or alive!"

Morgan swallowed and hugged the little cat just a bit tighter.

"And they say the Black Forest is a teeming ten o' bad folk. Thieves and cut-throats, escap't felons ant the lot all lurking there in the shadows, waiting their shancet to do ye in. Marshall C. Bridewell, they say, is no man ye'd be wanting to meet. He lives there, look ye, ant we can be thanking Good King John for keeping the dwarts ant robbers right where they all belong, in the Black Forest!"

By this time, Morgan's jaw was painfully tight. The boy wondered where Old Murdoch had learned so much for he did not talk a great deal with people. In fact, he lived all alone on a deserted part of the beach, by the Old Harbour's Well, more than half a mile up from Old John's.

"Is it true," Morgan asked, "that kittens come out of the belly of the mother cat?"

Old Murdoch's eyebrows shot up and he stopped puffing on his pipe. "Aye," he said after a lag, "tis true . . . whut ye said."

"And horses and cows?"

"Aye, all the same way!"

"Well," said Morgan, "how about me?"

The old fisherman started working at the wet and weedy knots in his fishnets. "Ah," he drawled out, "now tin't ye know. Yer

parents found ye unter a cabbage-leaf when ye were just a wee mite o' a thing. But tis not a thing to talk of."

Morgan frowned and never said one word until he saw the gray beach turn slowly into the familiar pink-and-white sand of Souther Shore. And a plume of white chimney smoke rising from behind a green curtain of lindens welcomed him home.

The cart was clipping along at a fair pace when Bonk! the iron rim of its small wheel came down hard upon a root. Morgan bounced high into the air and his thoughts returned immediately to the sturdy wooden bottom of the wheelbarrow.

"Ouch!" he said and rearranged himself. He looked up to discover that he was passing through the island's richest grove. Blueberry elders, red and white ashes and tall lindens towered together on both sides of the pathside stream and stretched northward in splendour and profusion. Morgan especially liked the leafy lindens and their lush shadows and the sunny patches of grass sorely tempted his lazy bones as he passed. Then all too soon the grove ended and the valley opened up into the workaday world.

The path came upon a road paved with white stone. A roadsign bearing the royal arms, a blue mailed fist holding a red rose against a white background, curtly proclaimed that Tubbersport awaited in either direction. To Morgan's right lay the Low Way through Yokelberry, and to his left, the High Way through the Timberwold. So it was to the left that Morgan and Mary turned their faces and fortunes.

"Hmm," the boy observed after travelling for awhile, "the High Way sure isn't very busy this morning, Mary. I wonder where all the farmers are?" But upon arriving at the turn-off into Frogoni's Mansion, Morgan dismissed this question from his mind. As usual he peeked through the heavy wrought-iron gate on the off-chance that he might spot Alleyne Frogoni, the richest man on the island. And like every other morning, Morgan only saw the carefully tended lawn that bordered the twisting gray-gravel driveway.

"I wonder what Alleyne Frogoni looks like?" mused Morgan. "They say that no one has ever heard him speak a word in his life. They say he's so rich that he's never had to. I wonder how people know when he wants them to pass the potatoes?" And that kept the boy's mind working all the way to Old John's warehouse deep in the heart of the Timberwold.

Morgan parked Mary and the cart in the shade of the rickety old building and jumped out. He reached under a loose shingle to pull out a weighty iron key. Whistling a lively sailors' chant, the boy jiggled up to the warehouse's barn-sized front door. He was about to lift up the padlock when a new one, shiny and laminated, practically jumped off the hasp at him.

"What's this?" mumbled Morgan aloud. He flipped up this new lock and stared at its tiny keyhole. He let it go with a metallic clatter. There on the ground, between his boots, lay the age-blackened remains of the old padlock. Taking it up, Morgan marvelled at its large, bright wounds. Puzzled, he gripped it in his hands and looked

about. The corner of his eye caught sight of something high up. Stepping back, Morgan saw black paint letters sprawled across the front wall of the warehouse. The sign, still dripping at the edges, read: CLOSED BY ORDR KING.

"What's this all about? I never . . . I better go tell Old John!" And as Morgan whirled about to leave, another surprise leaped out at him and nearly bowled him over. There on the nearest oak glowered a fierce ensign, a skull with wings for ears. It was burned deep into the tree's bark and when Morgan touched the smouldering black eyes he discovered they were still warm to the touch.

A twig snapped off to his right.

Almost afraid to look, Morgan did, but there was nothing except empty forest. Then a wind rose over the trees in the distance. "I think it's best to go," he said half aloud. An uneasiness he thought he had forgotten long ago had lodged itself again in his stomach. Suddenly the wind came up, whipping Morgan's hair about his eyes. The few leaves on the treetops broke out like flags. A golden-gray assortment of ground leaves cartwheeled into the air, attacking his back.

"Come on, Mary. We better get on home quick!"

Within a trice, the boy and the mule were rushing down the deserted High Way. The iron wheel clattered up a heartening retreat upon the pavingstones and the axe felt good against Morgan's leg. Then to his great bewilderment, a darkness, a smoky black, billowed up against the southern sky. A whisper-howl grew out of the distance and was hurried aloft by the rising winds.

"Hurry up, Mary!" Morgan shouted. He urged the wheelbarrow on by shoving his weight repeatedly forward. "There's something" And as they neared, a roaring--a broad, flat roaring--swelled in their ears.

After what seemed an eternity, Morgan and Mary arrived panting and hearts a-pounding at the turn-off to the lindengrove. It was marked by nothing save a splintered signpost. Fresh dirt, which had once held the roadsign upright, fanned out across the white pavingstones.

The cart, boy and Mary dived down into the little valley and pounded along its dirt path. Around trees and past bushes they sped upon their way. The sky above grew red, then redder.

Suddenly a bear, as high as a big black barn, loomed up, blocking the path. "Ook!" squeaked Morgan and almost tumbled out into its monstrous belly when Mary slammed on her brakes. The pale-faced boy, thinking the moment was to be his last, simply goggled up at the furry creature's lumbering advance--but then a hurry of fieldmice, woodchucks, wildcats, deer and wolves all came thundering by--and, without a second glance at Morgan, the bear or each other, disappeared down the path behind Mary. The bear too trundled by and left Morgan and the mule all alone in the face of the storm-stricken lindengrove. "Something is . . ." began Morgan, but before he could say, "certainly amiss!" a fiery fist smashed through the wall of lindenleaves. A howl and a cavernous roar filled the valley to the sky above. Shrieks and whistles, snapping twigs, falling branches and the occasional ex-

ploding treetrunk poured down upon Morgan's ears as the whole forest to his left gave way to the fire's rush.

And it was into this inferno that Mary galloped headlong. A high wave of heat washed over the two as they lurched along the trail. Finally it became so intense that Mary headed for the stream on the other side of some shrubbery. Morgan hopped out and helped her lower the wheelbarrow cart over the small bank and into the water. It felt blessedly cool on his thighs. Countless turtles, muskrats, watersnakes and beavers were plowing their way past Morgan and the cart. After Mary had climbed, or rather slid, down the soft muddy bank, Morgan splashed water onto her head and side.

And then the pair was off again, splashing and bobbing up and down.

The sky was a solid sheet of orange interwoven with dancing threads of scarlet and yellow. The smoke, now beginning to thicken and fill up the valley, confused the mule who, half-stumbling half-swimming, kept on pushing her burden home before her. Fiery brands fell all around, spitting out and hissing wickedly.

A sharp crack and the splitting of thick wood accompanied a shower of glowing sparks and embers. Morgan looked up to see a huge, flaming body of a linden being pulled down, fiery fingers grasping greedily at its wide trunk and heavy branches. Morgan did not raise his arm nor duck his head, could only watch with awe. The linden, instead of plummeting heavily down like an inert lump, twisted itself in

mid-air. With its outspread branches, it seized upon other trees and in its dying moment, managed to swing itself over and behind the boy, the mule and the pushcart. The ground heaved so much under the mighty crash that even Morgan, floating on the water, could feel it. He was at once elated and sickened.

And Mary charged on between the burning banks.

As the flames reached out and enveloped tree after tree, licking and sucking their tender bodies with a thousand tongues, the lindens would writhe, try desperately to shake off the unwanted touch until the heat proved too much. Then they would rend with a shriek, briefly exposing their quivering white innards, and lie still to allow the blazing rush to enter and blacken their wood, previously so unprotected, so undefiled.

The cart plunged out into a treeless meadow. Only small patches of black grass ringed with fire crept out from the lindengrove. Here the stream widened, grew slower and rockier. The bank was no more than a frog-hop high, so Mary had no trouble driving back onto the path. Morgan crawled out, still trembling from the escape, and wondered as more and more of his tall, leafy friends fell to the enemy.

The sky was overcast with smoke and gloom.

"Come on, Mary! We've got to tell Old John about the warehouse." And with that, Morgan whirled around and dashed up the hill, fists clenched, arms pivoting from the shoulders, and elbows reciprocating like

connecting rods on a millwheel. Pushing the empty cart before her, Mary trotted after.

Morgan topped the hill at full speed and raced flat-footed down the path to the cottage. But before he rounded the caragana bush, he caught sight of a large sheet of parchment nailed to the trunk of a pathside linden. Morgan stopped so short that Mary and the cart nearly bowled him over. It was a Royal Proclamation. Morgan had seen them before and especially liked the pointy black letters. And as if they were different than ordinary words, he used a deep and solemn voice to read them aloud:

Royal Proclamation

Let it be known to all Men
in the Kingdom that they no
longer have the Right to be.

Signed: King Lindenbane---
formerly Reisenalb,
Advisor to the King
and Court Magician.

"'all Men', that must be us islanders," mumbled Morgan. "Yes, it is. 'in the Kingdom'. That's us all right. What's this? 'they no longer have the Right to be'? Now isn't that silly? It must mean 'they no longer have the Right to be in the Kingdom.' But that doesn't make any sense either. Why shouldn't we? A Kingdom isn't a Kingdom without people!"

But then an ensign on the lower left-hand corner of the proclamation hit him in the eye. The winged skull! Morgan rushed on to the signature. "King Lindenbane? Reisenalb? What happened to Good King

John?" He scratched his blond mop of hair. This was certainly quite a puzzle.

The day was not yet half done, but already Morgan felt drained. His head was swimming in a tide of shocks, horrors and mysteries. Then after repeating "Reisenalb, Advisor to the King and Court Magician" several times, waves of memory washed over him to bring back a forgotten, but hideous picture to mind.

Once when Morgan was too young to go off chopping wood by himself, Old John had taken him for a ride up to Iryntor. It was tax-paying day. The journey was long and dull, but the small lad was very impressed by the castle's thick stone walls, the swagger of the soldiers and the bustle of merchants and tax-payers. Old John and little Morgan had entered into a large room and turned immediately green. Morgan glanced nervously around and all of the men in line were green as well. Craning his neck back, he discovered that the tax-office was topped with bottle-green glass.

"Tek a look theyah, boy!" whispered Old John. "See thet son of a bitch ahind thet tayble? He's a most parful man in the Kingdom, next to King John hisself! Reisenalb! Thet's his nayun!"

Morgan stared with wonder at the man. He alone was perfectly white. He was a tall man, almost lanky and had an odd-shaped head, it rising straight up from the nape of his neck and curving forward to a pointy tip. He was busy with his straight-line mouth, counting out pieces of gold, silver and copper into high, staggering columns. That was Reisenalb.

Old John and Morgan finally came to the front of the line. The white-skinned tax-collector looked up from his musty old book and, to Morgan's horror, fixed him with a direct stare. Reisenalb's eyes, dark-blue, intense and slightly menacing, nearly bowled the boy over backwards. After what seemed the longest time, they climbed slowly up to Old John and asked, "Name?"

And that was all Morgan could remember except that he shook for most of the ride home.

"Home! That's right!" shouted Morgan. "I've got to get home and tell Old John! I'm never going to get there at this rate!" So he dashed off down the path, hopping over roots and stones and cutting corners. Tree branches took turns swatting him as he passed. Finally he rounded the caragana and entered the home clearing. He stopped dead.

Instead of finding the trim little cottage, timberstand and stable, Morgan only found smoking ruins, toppled bricks, burned and broken beams, splinters of glass and twists of metal. He stumbled forward, mouth open, through a yardful of kitchen pots, pottery shards, torn and scattered clothes. The reek from the smouldering thatched roof tickled his eyes and nose. Burning wood and grass was a familiar smell, but like these jumbled commonplaces, was so foreign and hostile.

"What happened here?" the boy breathed. "What in the world . . .?" His voice was hollow in the stillness. Halting at the stone doorstep, Morgan looked down at the iron footscraper, some mud still caked on one side. The quiet heat of the burnt-out cottage brought a flush to his cheeks and forehead, penetrated his wet and

clinging breeches. "Is anybody here?" he croaked out. "Is anybody around?" Only the snap of an exploding ember answered. In a panic, Morgan turned from the cottage-ruins and ran down the path to the shore in search of his family.

"Hello! Hello! Help!" he shouted as he went. "Isn't anybody there?" Out on the beach, Morgan found miles and miles of nothing. The waves rolled up as ever, lapping steadily on the smooth slant of wet sand that bordered the shoreline. Sun-spangles danced off the sea in the distance where the sky was free of the smoky shroud hanging over Tilantes. "Maybe they went into town. I'll check the stable."

Morgan headed back up the path and into the yard. Rushing by Old John's overturned desk, he kicked his way through planks and kegs, over rolls of wire and other timberstand commodities. And when he finally arrived where the stable used to be, he found himself gazing into a heap of rubble. An unmistakable radiation of black spokes lay half-buried in the gray-white bed of ashes. Then there was the charred horseflesh . . . Morgan's heart sank in a sea of cancelled possibilities. Retching and spitting, he stumbled away and came to support himself against the upset desk. His back pressing against the highly-polished side support, Morgan slid down into a humble sitting position.

He just sat there. His eyes did not even see Mary browsing in a patch of high grass at the far end of the clearing.

A low moaning crept into his ears. Morgan ignored it at first, but there it was again. Somewhere on the other side of the desk. The

boy at last leaned over and peeked around the corner. He frowned. Nothing was there. Then the moan . . .

His eyes fell upon a hand lying in the rubble. Just a hand. Ledgers, business envelopes and shingle samples half-covered it as it lay propped against a dripping inkpot. Morgan did not quite know what to do about the hand. It looked much like an ordinary hand on a person's body, but this one just lay there either pointing or reaching.

"My goodness!" he exclaimed. His eyebrows arched up a little more. "What should I do? Should I touch it, bury it or just run away?" He frowned a bit more and shook his head. "There doesn't seem to be much sense in touching it. And how can I bury it without touching it? Running away seems the best idea, but where is there to run?" And as none of these answers seemed satisfactory, he just sat there some more.

Then the hand moaned again and gave a bit of a twitch. It flopped over and on the back of it, Morgan saw an inky circle from the top of the inkpot. The hand jumped and so did a heap of books and papers lying close by. A huge section of canvas jiggled and jerked in a heap on the ground. "Ag," groaned the heap. The hand grew an arm, tweed and all, as the clutter around the desk erupted. "Au!" said the tweedy arm, and more of the business suit became visible. After witnessing a few violent garbage-shedding spasms, Morgan marvelled to see half a body appear. Its legs were jammed under the heavy desk and its head, lost in the maze of canvas.

"Cu!" grunted the unseen head.

"Sir?"

"Morg, izzat yoo? Get this misable crep offen mah haid!"

Morgan jumped up and lifted off the canvas cover. There lay Old John, his face pale, but colorfully bruised in places. "I'm so glad to see you," cried the boy. "What happened?"

Old John moaned and, clutching his stomach, he grimaced. The opening lapels of his jacket betrayed a dark-red stain across the front of his new white shirt.

Morgan gasped. "Are you hurt?"

Old John's face screwed up again and he lay still. After a moment the pain seemed to pass and he pulled himself up into a twisted sitting position with a hand as bloody as a butcher's. He lay back against an inverted wastepaper basket. "Yas, mah boy. Ah aim huht!" he said at last. "Jist an ole sword in the lowah intestitines, tha's aw." Pain gripped his body once more and shook it. After a pause, he added with a smile, "Nuthin much mo than a motal wound . . ."

"Whatever in the world happened?"

"Well, Ah doan reckon Ah really know mahseff. Cept you maw an you brothers're no longah o' this worrold, Morg mah boy. Seems thet the ole dwarts have fanly busted on outa the Black Farst agin. Ah thought it'd happen soonah o' latah, an Ah said so." A cough interrupted him. He turned and spat out some blood.

"They closed up the warehouse, too," Morgan stammered. The message that he had hurried home so fast to tell seemed like nothing now.

Old John nodded. "The dwarfs!"

Morgan hated to interrupt the first conversation that he had ever had with his father, but he leaned over and asked, "Is there anything I can do? Run for help? Or clean you off? Or something?"

Old John simply lay back against the basket and, eyebrows tugging in at the sides, gazed up at the fleecy cloudlets. Steady and distant were his eyes. His jaw firm with resolution, Old John turned to look Morgan full in the face. One of his large, hairy hands wrapped around Morgan's and held it firmly. "Mah cabbage-leaf boy," he began calmly. He coughed. "Ah haven't been much o' a pappy, hav Ah?"

Morgan did not answer, but just blinked back into Old John's eyes.

"Ah've been a busy man, providin fo yoo an you maw and you two no-good-fa-nuthin brothers. They're aw gone now. But yoo know Ah was thinkin o' you future aw the ti-um, learnin yoo the fanly trade an aw." He wiped away a tear. "Ah guess there ain't much left o' 'Honest John's' now. There ain't much o' nuthin left . . ."

After a fit of body-wrenching spasms, Old John continued. "Son, Ah nevah gave yoo much durin mah lifeti-um, but Ah'm gonna leave yoo sumpun yoo'll be mighty proud o', an thet is the Legacy o' Justice. It is yor ole pappy's fondest wish as he lies heeya a-bleedin to death thet yoo bring this island to Justice, to avainge this unhawly bloodshaid in the nayum o' the dear and departed King John, who loved an protected us aw, but fanly fell to thet foul ingrate Reisenalb the Dwarf as the final

edition of the mawning noospapah has said. Conjured up a lightnin boat or sumpun last Friday noon . . ."

Morgan's heart went Bonk! at the merest mention of the name.

"Ah knew," continued the dying man, "when they stotted lettin those dirty dwarts outen the Black Farst thar'd be trouble. An thar was! Son, yoo gotta remembah one cardnal rool: The only Dwarf a Main cain trust is a stony-cold daid Dwarf. Dwarf blood is baid blood!"

"Beware, beware All of a Bowlegged Dwarf . . ." started Morgan, but Old John just nodded and cut him off.

"Thet's right! You just remembah thet, boy. An Ah'm countin on yoo, mah boy, Ah'm countin on yoo to restore Law and Order and the Reasonable Corprit Taxes thet flourished in the Times of Good King John. An also membah: since dwarts're inferior to Main, Main must rool. It is his arn-bound dooty. In the long run, the dwarts'll come up to main and shake him by the haind an say, 'Ah's glad yoo aw stepped in when yoo did an showed me the light, fo yoo is not only fairah in spirit than us ole dwarts, but yoo is fairah in complexion,' and then kiss yoo on the foot. Yoo gotta tek 'em in haind, boy. Yoo gotta split open evry one of those dwarf haid, spill out their brains, kill their wives an their chillen. Stamp! Stamp! Stamp! It's not an easy job. But membah, son: iffen yoo doan do it, nobody else will!"

And just as Old John was pointing his finger accusingly at the low-lying clouds, a spring seemed to snap within him. A grimace of pain blackened his face. His oratorical hand now clutched his breast.

His eyes bugged out like a frog's and his lips formed a final trembling message.

Morgan leaned forward to catch each precious syllable.

"Sock it to 'em," croaked the lips and fell mute.

the four horsedwarts

Old John's last words trailed off into gurgles; and his body, grinning away its incapacity, crumpled stupidly into a futile heap of smelling flesh. The large and black-haired hand tightened on Morgan's like a vise, then loosened slowly slowly, until it let slip all that was living. Old John's breathing had fled away with the birds. And the wind had died, stilling the rustle of the leaves at treetop.

Morgan arose from the twisted lump, the broken glass and polished wood. Dazed and sickened, he staggered over to where Mary was grazing. "Bring this island to Justice, whatever that is! Why, I don't even have a home and family anymore. I've got a cart to go in, but no place to go!" And he kicked a kitchen pot over a bush.

But before he could allow himself the luxury of sorrow, a distant drumming trembled in the air. It sounded like horses out in the meadow. And they were nearing! A shiver welled out of the ground and rose shuddering up his spine.

"They're coming back," Morgan gasped. Mary stopped munching the few strands of grass in her mouth. "Let's hide in this bush. Come on, Mary. Back up a little bit." But a red glow flared in her eye and she refused to move. "Mary! For crumb's sake, we've got to get out of sight!" Morgan pushed back on the front of the cart, but the mule stood rooted to the spot. "All right, you win!" he almost shouted,

throwing his hands into the air. "But if you won't back up, you'll go forward!"

Morgan jumped into the cart and without a second's hesitation, Mary trotted out to the centre of the yard and stopped behind a thick clump of trees. And just in time! Horseshoe iron was pounding down the path, biting into wooden roots, kicking up the occasional stone. The underbrush was alive with the crash of heavy bodies. Morgan drew aside a small bough and, to his amazement, heard the sky explode with guttural singing:

Hi ho hi ho,
It's awf to waur we go
With a sword and a song,
Bloodthirst and a thong--
Hi HO hi hohi ho hi HO!

Bursting through the caragana bush, two horsemen--strapped up in armour-plate--galloped across the yard and reined in their neighing nags beside the smouldering cottage. Their faces, tree-trunk arms and legs glistened as green as seaweed. "Har har har!" roared out the one. With a heavy broadsword, he took a swipe at an unbroken pane of window-glass and shattered it into a thousand slivers. And the other, swinging a bristling mace about his helmet, drove his horse in tight circles until it fairly shrieked.

Morgan gasped at the sight. "Green men? I've never seen green men before!" And then his heart kicked against his ribcage. "They're not men! Those are dwarfs!"

And before Morgan could think, another bush exploded and a third horsedwart barrelled into the clearing. He spurred his mount through the ashes of the stable to come screeching to a halt between the other two. And as if three of the four winds had chanced to meet upon the spot, a storm of dust and ashes whirled up around their horses' legs.

"Hela!" the third greeted the first two, saluting with a stout bow and arrow in his fist.

"Hela!"

"Hela!"

These words struck a dull pain in Morgan's chest like a blow upon an ancient wound. And overhead, the smoke-clouds rolled apart and let the sun wash down upon their shining armour.

"Kappun Ivunn back?"

The gaudy plumage of the first two horsedwarts shook and puffed in reply. "Espy ye aught," asked the broadsword-dwart, "by the Owld Harbour's Well?"

"Noth spay I," growled the bow-dwart from the back of his throat, "nither nowt, nither not, save an owld fisherman. Hardly worth the reckonknot!" His fat lips curled up into a grin.

Morgan's eyes opened all the wider, "Could they mean Old Murdoch?" he gasped. "Could they have . . .?"

"An owld man's a man, Marf," spoke up the broadsword. "Ye'll not catch me forgetting the wee shitska I coursed across this morning!"

Morgan bent the branch further back. There they were, hunched over in their saddles working knots into a leather thong with their stubby fingers. "What in the world," thought Morgan, "could they be doing?"

"Aye, good Matku's right," sniffed the mace-dwart. He was a trifle greener than the other two. "Tally it up. Ye'll need the cash come the week-end!"

A cold, sweaty hand seemed to grip Morgan's body. He let go the branch. "Don't tell me they actually are getting paid to kill people!" He blinked twice and the cart creaked uneasily under him.

"Think fast," barked out a voice. Morgan peeked under the branch just in time to see the dwarf called Matku hurl something high into the air. And within a flash Marf, the third dwarf, let fly an arrow from his bow. The arrow whistled high, then rang out like metal. After a pause, something hit the bush above Morgan's head and rattled down through the leaves and branches.

Clop!

A metal coin, pierced through with a finger-thick arrow, bounced off his hand and into the cart.

"Har har," chortled a dwarf throat. "I did it! Did ye see whaur it toct down?"

"T'is in that bush, I think."

Hoofbeats clopped leisurely towards the tree. The very sound froze Morgan's mind to the top of his head. They drew nearer and nearer, until . . .

"Attenn-SHUNN!" barked out a new voice. The hoofbeats whirled about and thundered away. Morgan almost fell back into the cart, waves of darkness lapping at the corners of his eyes.

The same voice, more frightening than the others, grated out again. "When are ye bumheads ever going to learn that when I send ye awf on a job, I don't want to come back and find ye playing games?"

Returning to his peekhole, Morgan blinked out to see a fourth dwarf, smaller than the rest, mounted on a pale mare. Before him, the other three were at attention, blushing greener than ever.

"Luggar!"

"Yes, kappun?" answered the greenest of the dwarfs.

"What's the tally?"

Luggar pulled out his thong and so did Marf and Matku. He collected them together and spurred his mount up to the kappun.

"Two hours gone and ye've only got six?" asked the lead dwarf, fingering the knots. "How do ye expect to feed a wife and childers on that? Better shape up, ye logheads!" Then he softened a bit. "After dinner, just to be fair to ye, we'll hit a more populated area up the beach. No use leaving it for another troop. Back to camp now, so ride OUT!"

Morgan sighed. Through the leaves he could see the rear end of the pale horse pivot about and the other dwarthorses falling in behind. Then a voice rose over the quickening clatter.

"Getting my arrow back here, kappun."

"Permission grunted!"

Morgan looked down at the dwarf's prize in the bottom of his cart. Then flopping down on top of it, he shouted, "Let's go!" Mary bolted forward and headed down towards the south-west beach, away from the dwarfs.

"Aurgg!" roared out Marf in surprise. "I flushed a shitska!"

"Get it," snarled the kappun, digging his heels into his horse's flanks. "Get it!"

And kicking up clods of turf, the four dwarthorses charged after the escaping boy in the wheelbarrow. Mary, having a bit of a headstart, pushed the cart around a thicket of lilacs and disappeared.

"Shoot, damn it, you slugabed!" bellowed the kappun.

"Luggar and Matku're in the way!"

"Shoot, or it's a week of K.P."

Morgan did not dare to look back. He was too busy just hanging on, watching the path before him lurch one way, then the other. Trees popped up before and fell behind and branches slapped him in the face.

"Shoot! Shoot!"

Morgan did not even hear the whistle. A lightning-bolt of pain slapped him face downwards in the bouncing and rattling wheelbarrow-box. "My shoulder! I'm hit! I'm dead!" His head began to swim.

"A hit!" shouted Luggar, waving his mace. "Good shot!"

"Twas just a skayne!"

"No matter! It's heading for the fence!"

And before Morgan's staggering eyes, a chain-link fence loomed up, stretching all the way down to the sea. "It was never there before!"

But Mary knocked him into the bottom of the cart with her nose and charged.

Spoorang!

The front wheel struck, Morgan tumbled upside down, and they were through. When he peeped over the side panel of the box, he found himself speeding along the sandy-gray beach of Westershire. Everything was still in one piece.

The fence was shrinking against the horizon, but he could still see several dwarfs trying to squeeze their horses underneath a section of slightly sprung chain-link.

"Go, Mary, go!" Morgan laughed ecstatically. "Go, you good old mule. Go like the wind!"

And so the mule and the boy joggled along the gradual curve of the shoreline and the dwarfs disappeared entirely.

Rainclouds were moving in from the west.

After the excitement of the chase, Morgan felt his right shoulder begin to throb and glow, sometimes burn. Mary trotted on, having reduced her pace, and looked sadly down from time to time upon the boy in the wheelbarrow's box.

A little later, Morgan felt Mary slacken even more in her gait. He raised himself up with his left elbow to discover the sea washing across the beach.

"The tide!" moaned Morgan out loud. "How could I forget the tide? I suppose we'll have to look for a way to get up into the forest."

And so they splashed on until they found a gradual slope up the small cliff. At the top of that lay a tiny trail that wormed its way through a tangled crowd of gnarled and twisted trees.

"I guess that's the way we'll head, Mary, as that's the only way." Following the little path, they discovered that the sunlight barely reached the ground. The grass and the shrubbery were inky black instead of green.

"I'm sure this isn't the Black Forest," Morgan's voice trembled. "Or at least . . . yet. This could only be the edge." He glanced around at the lurking shadows and wished that he could sink further into the cart.

Just as he was becoming more and more worried about the prospect of finding himself in the Black Forest with a November evening coming on, the snaky trail opened up onto a larger one. It was almost as wide as the High Way and paved with gravel. Yellow birch-leaves, some still green about the veins, blanketed its shoulders. Mary stopped.

"Well, I wonder which way we should go?" the boy mumbled to himself.

And as the wind in the treetops gave no answer, Mary steered the cart off to the left and Morgan made no objection. Underneath the wheelbarrow wheel, the leaves crisped and crackled.

Darkness crept out of the earth as night grew nearer. A light rain was pattering all around and a calm hung on the forest.

Breathing white plumes into the breeze, Mary would tug or nibble at one of the ditch-lichens and, from time to time, raise her gaze to the sorry heap beneath a roadside evergreen.

Morgan's head rested upon a root. Half-dazed, he heard only the blood drumming in his ears. La lub, la lub, la lub. Gradually his heart began to shake his frame, the root and then the whole forest. He opened his eyes and the heartbeats became hoofbeats. Distant shouts floated through the chilly evening air.

"Aur! There're the trail! A wheel and hoofmarks."

"Looks like we're on the right track."

"Grump! Wish this bleary-eyed rain'd let up!"

"Fall in!"

Morgan stumbled to the cart and flopped halfway over the side. But he could not, for the life of him, make it all the way in. Just when he was about to slump again to the ground, he felt Mary take a toothy grip on the seat of his pants. One last pull and he was in.

"Onward," he gasped. "Quickly."

But Mary was already galloping as fast as she could. She pounded up a side-road that branched off to the right. Zigging and zagging around bush and bramble, she found that each bend brought a smaller and smaller road. The road dwindled into a wide path and the path, into a narrower one. And that finally petered out at the base of a small hill. But Mary pressed onward, dodging the trees and shrubs. Treelings, she simply bowled over. At the crest of the hill, Morgan peered off into the distance and spied a ghostly white band against the black. "There's

the High Way!" He pointed. "Straight ahead!"

Suddenly the whole dark forest--trees, trails, High Ways and hills--reared up in front of his finger to fall SMASH down on top of him. Morgan tried to shout, but no sound came. He could not breathe. There he was with Mary and the splintered wheelbarrow at the bottom of a gulch, a high cliff towering to his either side.

"ooooo!" Air finally was finding its way back into his lungs.

Dangling a short length of two-by-four from her harness, Mary came over and sniffed Morgan's face. Then there came a smashing and crashing overhead. It was all Morgan could do to roll over and hide under a nearby bush.

"Over this way!" shouted a dwarf.

Mary licked Morgan's face until he opened his eyes. Then she looked deeply into them and shook her head. Up she reared and wheeled about and galloped away along the little valley, braying her head off.

Sand from above came cascading down on top of Morgan's bush.

"Down the trench. We've got it this time!" rang out a voice from above.

Two mounted dwarthorses plowed down the sides of the cliff, churning up waves of sand, and with mighty kicks drove off hot in pursuit of Mary.

And these were the last memories Morgan had before he collapsed into blessed oblivion.

His fair young body lay heaped up under a huckleberry bush like

a bundle of clothes--bloodstained, dirty and torn--whose owner was far far away splashing and diving in a vast swimming hole of darkness.

gobble

iron horses thundered over blazing hedges

froth-kicked seas screamed:

the wind and the wave are one!

shadows of flame cackled open a welcome,

the burning eye whistled a fluorescent tomb

short stubby fingers

cried Wake Up!

Wake Up!

Wake Up!

Morgan started. Someone was shaking him. He opened his eyes.

"Wake up, fella," came a voice from the lantern in his face.

"Wake up."

Rolling over onto his back, he discovered that he was as numb as a brick. Then he became suddenly aware of a grotesque face, flickering with flame, scarcely an arm's length into the night. Two heavy-lidded eyes, separated by a sharp nose, were peering into his.

The lantern swung in the air; and shadows, as high as the tree-tops, swirled out of its sight.

A tiny sword glinted in the stranger's fist.

"Don't you dare hurt me!" screamed Morgan, scrambling farther under the huckleberry bush. "Stay away, whoever you are! Who are you, anyway?"

"Gobble," came the reply.

"Oh my gosh," thought Morgan, "some sort of animal has found me out and is going to eat me!" His eyes, darting about for a weapon, any weapon, fell upon the lumber axe that must have spilled out of the cart when it capsized. It was only a few feet to his right. Morgan sprang to the axe--but too late! A curvy-toed boot was already upon it.

"What do you want?" shrieked the frightened boy. "You unspeakable ogre!"

"Ogre? Me?" replied the lantern-bearer, twisting up a pan-shaped mouth. He tugged at a pointed ear jutting out from beneath his pointed hat. "I should be asking you all these questions. Like what are you doing in my ditch?" The sleepy-weasel face broke into a smile and the knife slid back into the belt.

"Oh . . . uh . . . er, that is," stuttered Morgan, "I'm dreadfully sorry to raise my voice at you like I did, sir. But I have seen ever so many monsters today and didn't really expect anything like you . . . " Pointing to his right shoulder, he added, "And I'm wounded!"

"Hhm! Wounded? By the dwarfs, I'd bet." Holding the lantern closer, the stranger squinted at the dark-red stain on the navyblue cloth. "Well, no problem there. We can take that out with cold water. No need to worry! But we'd better get you into something dry and put some steak and mushrooms under your belt." He held out his hand and helped Morgan up. "Gobble's the name."

To his surprise, Morgan found that the stranger was not as huge and fearsome as he had first believed, but actually only a tiny fellow. He was not even as tall as Morgan himself. "Gobble? Oh, that's your

name! And here I thought you were going to eat me up. My name's Morgan."

Gobble laughed. "I'm called Gobble because I like eating, but unfortunately not little boys." He pinched Morgan's fat little belly. "But I am pleased to meet you just the same, Morgan. Welcome to the Black Forest . . . where you very well may have been eaten up if I had not happened along here tonight." And as the boy did not seem to be much cheered by his Forestrien sense of humour, Gobble added, "Well, let us hurry home as you look as numb as a brick."

Under the dark purple of the sky, the two new friends made their way along the bottom of the gulch. "It's best to keep down here with the lantern, so as not to be seen from the road," hissed the one.

"Is that the High Way?" whispered the other.

"No. The High Way is miles away to the east. That's the Royal Dwarf-o-way, as the dwarfs call it. It's just "the road" to me.

"So the dwarfs . . ."

"Shhh!" hushed the first figure, flapping out the lantern.

The two travellers froze in the shadows. A twig snapped up ahead.

Silence.

Then two yellowish-green almonds blinked out of the dark wood, looking this way and that. Another wait and footfalls shuffled away through the leaves into the night.

After a minute, the elder voice broke the stillness. "All right. Let's hurry now, but soft. Follow close."

And the two shades crept noiselessly supperward.

"Well, here we are," announced Gobble. "Safely home: no hits, no runs, no errors."

Morgan looked around. Neither house, cottage nor cattle shed was in sight. Only a grassy knoll to either side. And against the starry clearness of the sky were silhouetted twisted trees and lumpy rocks.

Fumbling in the pockets of his baggy jacket, Gobble mumbled, "The key, the key, where in East Heck is the key?" Reams and reams of assorted handkerchiefs, bits of paper, pipes, ribbons, tins, screwdrivers, snuffboxes, curls of wire, watches and pliers appeared as he carried his search from pocket to pocket, from jacket to pants. "Here, hold this for me," he grunted, handing Morgan a quantity of oddments. Then he began to dig anew.

"Ah, here we are! Gobble smiled at last. He triumphantly drew a very unkeylike key from his watchpocket. In the dark, Morgan could only make out that the object was small, shiny and U-shaped. Gobble placed it against the sword in his belt and lo! the peculiar key clung, without falling off, to the side of the blade. Morgan's mouth dropped open another notch and his eyes bugged out.

"You never know when this stuff will come in handy," explained Gobble as he restuffed his pockets with the freight in Morgan's hands. "If you ever see a nut, bolt or pin, always pick it up. For if you don't you'll need it for sure the day after next."

And to add one wonder upon another, Gobble took the key in hand and walked up to a sizeable boulder jutting out of the turfy bank. He made a host of complicated signs above its upper face until a faint, but unmistakeable click answered deep within.

Then, pivoting on some unseen axis, the huge rock swung smoothly outwards to reveal a pitch-black hole in the hillside.

"In we go," said Gobble, helpfully moving Morgan towards the opening, his hand about the boy's chubby waist.

"In there?" gasped Morgan.

"Certainly. That's where I live."

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"That depends. What's on your mind?"

"Are you a dwarf?"

Gobble burst into paroxysms of high-pitched laughter. He slapped his knee. "That's cute," he choked. "That's really cute." And he laughed some more. After he had softened into chuckles and giggles, Gobble put his hand on Morgan's left shoulder and confided with an arch smile, "Yes, of course I'm a dwarf. Do you still think I'm an 'unspeakable ogre'?" And he renewed his merry fit.

While gale upon gale of Gobble's laughter rebounded from the surrounding slopes and thickets, Morgan eyed the dark mouth in the hill and thought about the stories that he had heard at the feet of Old Murdoch. "It's rather dark in there," he stammered. "I'd much prefer it if you went first to light the way."

"Stuff!" laughed Gobble and pushed Morgan's backside forward. "I have to go second to close the door, don't I? And it's manners besides. Beyond the curtain there'll be light enough. Mind your head," Morgan floated his hand gingerly into the hole and, sure enough, he felt heavy cloth. Light exploded from a crack and then warmth. "Quick like a bunny," encouraged Gobble, punctuating with his finger.

Morgan jumped and started crawling.

The tunnel was constructed of baked brick and, for comfort, the bottom was covered with moss. The circular vision of a candlelit room hurried him forward through the dark.

Then a thud shook the surrounding brickwork. A drip of cold water splashed on the back of Morgan's neck and a heavy iron bolt slid to.

"Gobble?" shouted Morgan. He tried unsuccessfully to twist himself about in the tunnel. "Gobble, are you still there?"

But when Morgan looked back between his legs, there was only blackness.

"Cuckoo!" cried an inhuman voice deep within the cavern. The sound rattled from wall to curved wall. "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

"Gobble, is that you?"

Heavy breathing, but not Morgan's, filled the tunnel.

"Isn't that just like that stupid cuckoo clock?" asked the dark void behind Morgan. "Bought that machine from a drummer eighteen years ago and it still doesn't know how to tell time. Supposed to be the best in the world, those Black Forest clocks. Move along now. You're holding up traffic."

Morgan heaved a sigh of relief and scuffled onwards until the circle of light grew into a cosy chamber. He hopped into the warmth of the dwarfhouse and gazed all about him. The tiny room was strewn with half-read manuscripts lying face down, socks, pamphlets, dishes, maps, cups, pipe-cleaners and ashtrays. One was well-insulated with books, massive clay tankards, grotesque figurines, black vials and sundry tins of tobacco, all crammed onto a few bowbent shelves.

Then Gobble came clambering in and threw his togs into the lap of an armchair. "Well," he said puffing, "what say we get you out of those damp clothes?" The dwarf wrapped his arm about Morgan and led him over to a tiny bed tucked into the wall. "Heh, heh. We'll just start with your jacket . . . Heh heh. And your shirt . . ."

Morgan sat back on the bed and looked up at the cuckoo clock above the library as Gobble was yanking away at his trousers. "Are you going to look at my cut?" he asked. "Uh, we'll leave my shorts on, thank you."

"Your cut?" puffed out Gobble. "Ah yes, your cut. Now let me see . . ." The dwarf sat down on the bed and began breathing heavily in Morgan's ear. Bracing one hand upon the boy's knee, he craned his neck around Morgan's and fingered about for the wound.

"It's further up," said Morgan. "And on my shoulder."

"Ah, yes," said Gobble. "Ah yes!"

While Gobble was busy, Morgan's eyes fell to the hand that was squeezing his thigh, and to his great amazement he beheld a lindenring on the dwarf's little finger.

"Hey, where did you get that ring?"

"The ring?" said Gobble. "I traded a load of furniture for it in town. Ah yes, I see your cut now. It's dreadful. Just dreadful."

"Which merchant?"

"Must you keep asking all these questions? Honest Goniff, if you must know!"

"That's my ring!" shouted Morgan. "That is, it was my ring!"

Gobble's face came around to peer into his. "Your ring?"

But . . ."

"I traded it in for my mule . . . and all the money I had."

"Where did you get it" demanded Gobble. "Where did you get it?"

"The ring? Gosh, I don't really know. I've just always had it."

Gobble jumped up and held out the ring. "Here, try it on. I want to see!"

Morgan slid it onto his ring-finger and it hugged him like a glove. "See! It used to sit right here where it made my skin go green."

"Hmm," puzzled Gobble, pacing back and forth. "You had better keep it then. And I'll look to the medicine."

Before long, Morgan was propped warmly up in bed, swaddled in thick blankets and herb-scented bandages. Gobble bustled about in front of the fireplace preparing supper. And as he watched, Morgan realized that the dwarf had a slight limp, his left foot being bent inwards.

"So you fell off the cliff and lay there until I came along?" said Gobble, as he placed a huge tureen of steaming soup on the tray in front of Morgan.

With a large spoon Morgan explored the soup which was still too hot to sip. "Yes, and that was the last I saw of Mary, too. Have you seen a mule running around loose lately?"

"No. Can't say that I have," answered Gobble, sitting behind a steamy cloud of soup. "But I'll keep my eyes open. Generally I don't have much to do with mules."

After blowing on his bowl all this while, Morgan dared to taste a sip of his soup. The clear liquid part of it was delicious. Next he tried one of the little pastry rolls gathered in a clump on the bottom. "Um," he exclaimed, rolling his eyes upwards. "These are the best things I've ever eaten." Each little ball was an explosion of flavour.

"That's the magic of dwarf herbalism for you!" said Gobble. He jumped up from his stool and began dusting spices over the meat in the frying pan. After three drops from a curly-necked bottle, Gobble tossed on handful after handful of button-mushrooms, smothering the steak out of sight. Then the pan went over the glowing coals.

"I suppose you'll want something hot to drink after the main course," he sang out. Grabbing a tin from a nearby shelf, he held it up for Morgan to see. Dumping four heaping spoonfuls from the tin into a dragon-shaped percolator, he said, "Dr. Piper's First Rate Kava will perk you up just fine."

Sitting himself down again, Gobble returned to the conversation. "That's quite a story, Morgan. You'll have to tell me more about yourself." He jumped up and ran to the fire. "When you live alone out in the woods like I do, you learn to appreciate other people. Tell me more about your folks. I have a passionate and all-consuming interest in family trees."

Morgan slurped the last little bit from his tilted bowl. But before he could answer, Gobble stuck his head into the fireplace. Tilting it this way, then that, the dwarf sniffed once and then once again. He waited for an instant and then suddenly flipped the steak over with his fork. It sizzled, sputtered and smoked. And after waiting three and one-half seconds, he added four pinches of green spice, two of red and one splash from the corkscrew bottle.

"You say that your father's name was John the Woodcutter," continued Gobble, wiping his brow with his sleeve. "Hmm, I think I've seen him once or twice in my travels to the South. What color hair did you say he had?"

"Black, and he was quite big."

"Yes, I've seen him for sure. A good fellow, Old John. And your mother's name was . . .?"

"Martha."

"Martha, yes, Martha. I believe I saw her once when I peeped in your cottage window late one night. And her hair was . . .?"

"Dark brown. But that didn't stop her from saying that I was making her go gray."

"Ah, yes, dark brown. My, we're practically old friends, aren't we, Morgan?"

"Well, I suppose."

Gobble leaned over and speared a mushroom, deep brown and juicy, with his cooking fork. He popped it in his mouth. "And you would be about how old? Don't tell me. Let me guess. I'd say you were born in the Year of Early Frosting O'er. Right?"

Morgan smiled. "In April's Spring of Gladness."

"Just like the song, hey?"

"How could you tell?" asked Morgan.

"Oh, you can't fool old Gobble. As we say here in the Black Forest, I'm as old as the hills." Gobble rose smiling and went to the steak. Wrapping a potholder about the handle of the fry pan, he lofted it down upon the oaken board. "Oh my, this smells good," he sighed. He cut the steak in two, placing one half on each plate, and handed Morgan the piece with the bone in it.

Gobble sat down. "Ah yes, I've been around. I've even lived in the town. Taught school for awhile. Until some smartass kid made trouble for me by spreading lies around that I got friendly with him in the washroom. Boy, and that little flip grew up to be a respected member of the community. The mayor, in fact. Some laugh, hey?"

Morgan looked up. "Mayor Wasserman? Would he do that?"

Attacking his steak with knife and fork, Gobble cackled, "Little Willie Wasserman, you joy and wonder." He took a bite and chewed. "You smartass kid!"

And so ended the table talk of the evening. Both the dwarf and the boy crouched over their plates and gobbled away to their hearts' content.

While Morgan was making a few finishing touches on his steak-bone, Gobble poured two skull-shaped cups brimming full of kava. He picked them off the mantelpiece and handed one to Morgan and set the other on the table.

Morgan sniffed the steaming drink and crinkled up his nose.

"Kava's good for you," said Gobble, as he gathered up the dirty dishes and stacked them in the cooking pan. "It'll make your shoulder feel better."

"It's not hurting too much anymore."

"I'll be right back to take some kava with you as soon as I put these dishes out where the animals can lick them off." Clanking and rattling, Gobble disappeared into the tunnel. His voice echoed out of the opening, "One thing this hole does not have is running water. But I make do."

Morgan heard the doorstone open. A breath of cool air rushed into the room. The embers in the fireplace reddened and the lone candle on the mantel flickered. "I know I don't have anything to worry about," said Morgan to himself, "but I always get the feeling that he's going to lock me in here. And this kava . . . I don't know about it at all." The bony face on the cup stared back at Morgan. He turned the handle about so it grinned harmlessly into the fireplace. "I'm just being silly, I know, but . . ."

Then Morgan heard the doorstone thud shut.

"But better Safe than Sorry," he thought, "as Flesherton Costick would say." And in a flash, Morgan switched the cups of kava. He tried to place his cup, as best he could, in exactly the same position as was Gobble's.

And when the dwarf scrabbled back through the hole in the wall, Morgan was quietly sipping on his cup of kava.

"We'll pick up the plates in the morning, heh heh," said Gobble and wiped his hands on his trousers.

At first, the drink tasted like bitter peppermint to Morgan, but after he had let it down the full length of his throat, he sensed a second taste. It reminded him of rhubarb, and then, milk of magnesia. "What an odd drink," he coughed, lips fast a-numbing.

"Don't you like it?"

"Oh yes," replied Morgan in a hurry. He then gulped down a second mouthful, and felt it fan coolly out after the first.

"I find it better than tea, myself," chatted Gobble. "Mud, that's what I call tea. Mud! Coffee I don't mind. I like a cup now and again. Just to keep me regular." Gobble picked up his cup and looked at it carefully. "Oh, I thought I gave you the good cup. Don't tell me that both of them are cracked now."

Pulling a pair of square wire-rim glasses from his breast-pocket and pinching them onto his nose, Gobble leaned forward, tongue between his teeth, and peered down into Morgan's cup. "Guess I'm

getting senile. Can't remember a thing anymore," mumbled the dwarf and shuffled over to the easychair, his cup of kava in his hand. He picked up his coat and the other things in his way and threw them on the floor. "Yessir, best part of the day," sighed Gobble to himself. He took a sip and frowned. "I thought I made mine a lot stronger than this."

A delicious feeling was stealing over Morgan. The pain in his shoulder had stopped throbbing. In fact, his shoulder, like the rest of his body, seemed no longer to exist, except when Morgan picked up his cup to kiss its lip. Then it felt disconnected, very distant. Sweating happily, Morgan settled back and took another swig of the wonder drink.

"Share a pipeful?" inquired a voice which Morgan recognized as familiar. Gobble leaned forward. "Do you want me to pack you a pipe?"

"No, that's all right," said Morgan peacefully after a pause. "I'm happy just to lie here . . ."

Soon (or was it later?) Morgan found himself breathing a musky, heady aroma that was hanging in the air. Gobble was still active, sucking on his horn of a pipe, slurping a bit of warm cooling kava from time to time and plucking on a seven-stringed lute whose fretted neck was long and curved at the end.

Each note of the simple song seemed to burst from the string, float into the air and gently explode into a thousand glowing bits of falling fire. Another and another soared skyward, lived a pulse-beat and wove a breathing melody.

The corners of Morgan's lips bubbled up and he discovered that he was smiling.

The Year of Early Frosting-O'er
In April's Spring of Gladness
Tells a tale of rue
Of a queen so true
In April's Spring of Sadness.

With eyes as blue as August skies
And hair of golden yellow,
A prince was born
On a chilly morn,
A flow'ring little fellow.

"Queen Ygena is my name;
I'm sad, I'm sad to crying
For my baby's gone,
Ta'en far beyon
And I'm left here sorely sighing.

"The prince without a name, I know,
Has left behind his mother
In black despair
With no kingly heir:
What will I tell his father?

"Now his sister's lost her twin
The White Throne has lost its man;
Our family's lost
To the Early Frost:
What will I tell my husband?

"With eyes as blue as August skies,
And hair of golden yellow,
In this frozen pond
I'll break life's bond
As my heart's b'yond the rainbow."

Queen Ygena, Wife of John,
In April's Spring of Madness
Did take her life
In time of strife
In April's Spring of Sadness.

Even after Gobble had stopped playing and removed the tray from across the bed, the music continued to dance in Morgan's eyes.

"Now that we've had our harmless giggle, it's time for bed," floated the haunting Gobble-voice.

The candle winked out.

"I hope you don't snore."

"Om," replied Morgan's throat.

"There's lots of room in this bed. I slept seven dwarfs and a dog in it once. It might look small, but it's bigger than it looks.

Jiggle.

Toss.

Silence.

"Heck," came the same voice, "I bet I could get a dozen in here. Easy. A baker's dozen."

Darkness, with an unheard snore, descended upon the empty room deep within the bowels of the earth, unknown to the waking world.

And how many cuckoos leapt forth to mark the witching hour?

butterfly butterfly

Many hours later, Morgan awoke from a long and dreamless slumber. He sat up in an unfamiliar bed and rubbed his eyes. "Where am I?" he almost blurted out, but then he remembered. "Ah yes. I'm not at home anymore." He sighed as he stretched and that felt good. "I might be a homeless orphan lost in the middle of the Black Forest, but at least I don't have to go chopping trees in the Timberwold today." Then he blushed because he did not know if he should be thinking things at a time like this.

Gobble looked up from a purple tome. A plume of dust shot into the air as he clapped it shut. In a single cross-the-face motion, the dwarf removed his boxframe spectacles and studied Morgan thoughtfully. Then he jumped up and placed the brass-hinged book on the table. "Rise and shine," he said. "I hope you're all rested up. You certainly slept long enough. In fact, it's almost time for bed again."

"Boy, oh boy," grinned Morgan sleepily. "I do feel better. And I'm hungry too."

"What say we pop down to the pub and get you a breakfast fit for a king? We've been cooped up in this hole long enough."

Morgan slid his legs over the edge of the bed and looked around for his clothes. Gobble helped him dress by hunting under the table and behind armchairs for all the bits and pieces that Morgan had brought in on his back.

"How's the old arm today?" asked Gobble, holding the boy's shirt for him. "Feeling better?"

Morgan flexed his arm. "It still is mostly a dull ache, but the burning's gone. It only hurts when I move it up and down."

"Perhaps tonight we just might put a bread poultice on your cut and fix you up as good as new," said Gobble cheerily. "Well, let's get the show on the road!" But in mid-step he snapped his fingers and his mouth took on an enlightened smile. "Just about forgot. I might as well return that cup of sugar that I borrowed from my neighbour McAtom, just across the way. Yessir, I've been putting it off and putting it off . . ."

Gobble grabbed up an empty kava cup from the table and swung it about his head to dry out any of yesterday's leftovers. Then he scooped a cupful of brown sugar from a moldy old wooden keg, tapped off the excess and headed for the door. "Bring that book on the table along with you," he shouted over his shoulder. He disappeared into the tunnel. "And blow out the candle after you!"

Morgan picked up the book. It was the one Gobble was reading. "Hmm. Nice cover," he mused to himself. "I wonder if this coat-of-arms is really gold inlay?" And so without wondering any further, he blew out the candle and staggered his way through the dark, only tripping the once over what sounded very much like Gobble's lute.

"Cuck-" bid the clock, as Morgan was crawling his way out.

"Cuckoo!"

The sun was bright and high above the Black Forest.

"Higher than I thought it would be," said Morgan to himself, as he and the dwarf made their way down a twisty path just wide enough for the two of them. "I must have caught up on all the sleep I've been missing in the last so-many weeks."

So Morgan enjoyed himself by taking in all the sights and sounds as they passed along. The woods all around were bathed in a hazy greenness and the grassy hillocks looked as soft as clouds. Mushrooms and toadstools--red, white and speckled--bordered the trail and drifted aimlessly off to form new colonies, fairy-rings and diamond clusters,

"This Black Forest doesn't look at all spooky," thought Morgan. "I really can't imagine where Old Murdoch got such funny ideas into his head!" Morgan shrugged his shoulders at a gnarled and age-blackened tree and tripped along.

And although there was hardly any wind at all on this warm and sunny Tuesday, a spout of blood-red leaves, mixed with golds and browns and yellows, skipped and lurched amongst the bare-armed trees. Leaves in its path leapt into its spiral dance and whirled upwards while others trembled and flipped out, summersaulting once or twice, only to be left behind on the sod.

"I wish," Morgan spoke up after awhile, "that I had some money on me, so I could repay you for all your kindness in taking me in and feeding me."

"Oh, don't you worry your head about that, Morgan my boy," said Gobble. "Money is muck, but unfortunately muck isn't money. There are countless things in the world more valuable than money."

"Like friendship?" queried Morgan.

"Like friendship, among other useful things."

At length the pair of woodwalkers came upon a lonely cottage off to the side of the footpath. It was old and rickety, built of rude boards much like a stable. As it jutted out the side of a hill, the grass had spread over the shingles and now formed the better part of the roof.

"Here we are at McAtom's," announced Gobble. "Let me have that book now."

Morgan handed Gobble the book which, by this time, had begun to weigh heavily on his good arm. Seizing a fist made of brass, the dwarf rapped once, then twice and finally thrice before the thick oaken door creaked open half a crack.

"Whut d'ye want, mon?" asked a shiny eyeball hovering in the dark slit.

"Open up, McAtom. It's only me, Gobble. I'm with a friend of mine on the way to the pub and I thought I'd stop by to repay you the cup of sugar I borrowed from you Thursday last."

"Sugarrrr?" asked the eyeball. "What sugarrrr?"

"Sugar!"

A chain rattled and the door opened wider. A round sandy-haired head appeared in the gloomy breach and its squint fell immediately upon the boy at Gobble's side.

"A frrrriend of yourrrrs, ye said?" questioned the pale figure, frowning. A cyst in McAtom's left eye made Morgan lower his eyes to the doorstoop.

"Yes," replied Gobble, pushing his way into the cottage. "And I've brought you the book you were asking about as well."

"The book?"

"The book!"

"Oh, aye, the book. Coom in."

Gobble turned around to the boy at his heels. "You wait right here," he said, closing the door. "I won't be a minute." The door popped open again and the dwarf's head reappeared. "And remember, Don't stray off. You're still in the Black Forest."

Bang! The door slammed shut.

Morgan sat down, hands upon his knees, beside the footscraper and leaned back against the sun-warm door. Voices drifted out from under it. They were too soft to be understood, but loud enough to tell there were two people talking. And so the forest waited in silence. Minute after minute tripped by until they began to walk, then lag and then finally drag into boredoms.

Then out of nowhere there flitted an azure-winged butterfly. Morgan's mind, for want of some form of diversion, followed its zigzag

course from one toadstool to the other, from grassblade to thistle-- until it disappeared behind a small copse across the path.

Morgan stood up on the doorstep to see if he could spot the butterfly. He boosted himself up on tiptoes and there it was, bobbing precariously on a moss-covered boulder half-sunken into the sod. What an unseasonable sight! But as soon as the boy caught sight of it, the butterfly lofted into the air again and made its way further into the forest.

At first Morgan was just going to let it vanish forever, but the airborne wight tilted in a ray of sunshine and burst into the most celestial of flashes.

"I'll just go a little ways into the woods," thought Morgan. Holding his ear to the crack at the bottom of the door, he assured himself that the conversation had neither quickened, slowed nor broken off. The half-words and indistinct mutters continued on as before. "Gobble is bound to be in there for a good while yet," said Morgan to himself. "And I shan't get lost."

So the curious little boy followed the butterfly as it wobbled ever onwards toward the sun. Glowing a rich blue, it promised of another gemlike explosion. On and on it travelled in a leisurely-looking flight. And Morgan, at a never-diminishing distance, ran after it.

Around a bush and up and up danced the butterfly. Eyes fixed upon the dainty sight, Morgan followed after and below.

Bump! He stumbled over something more hard than soft.

Before he knew it, the butterfly-chaser found himself staring into the face of a fierce brown clump.

Snick! A long, thin crocodile-blade appeared in a fist beneath his nose. "What do you think you're doing?" growled the brown clump, who, after a second's observation took the form of a boy no older than Morgan. He was skinny, dressed in a tight-fitting leather pantsuit and had a pointed cap jammed down around his ears. A curl of raven hair peeked out at his temple.

"I . . . I . . . was just chasing a butterfly and didn't notice you squatting there behind the bush," stammered Morgan. "I'm dreadfully sorry."

The boy hitched up his pants with his free hand. His pale face, thin with high cheekbones, was dark with rage and his unlarge mouth, firm with fighting tension. "Butterfly, butterfly," sang out the strange boy, "drag home your guts. Butterfly, flutter by or I'll rip off your nuts!" Then crouching over into what seemed to be an unshakable stance, this leather-jacketed singer of the woods twisted forward one slow and deliberate step at a time. The knife swished closer and closer to Morgan's nose.

"Oh dear," he thought. "I never should have left the door-stoop! But what a well-dressed murderer!"

The boy's trousers and vest, indeed, were made of leather soft and supple as skin itself; and under the loosely-tied vest was a white shirt, unmarred save for the ragged sleeves.

In a sudden motion, the knifeblade flicked off Morgan's top button.

"Just who do you think you are, jumping on top of me like that, Mr. Butterfly?" snarled the boy.

"I said I was sorry. It was an accident . . ."

"Boy, you're lucky, kid. I thought you were a dwarf and I was just about to disembowel you." The boy plucked a leaf from the bush and, holding it up to Morgan's nose, dropped it. Before the leaf had trickled half the way to Morgan's navel, the shining blade had snicked it into three. The separate pieces flashed like minnows as they fell. "You're not a spy, are you?" breathed the boy.

"No," Morgan answered in a hurry. The knife drew away from his face.

"No, you're not a spy," the skinny boy sneered. Sneaking theatrically around in front of Morgan and darting his eyes back and forth, the boy explained, "A spy has to be quick and sly, make decisions in a split second which will determine if he lives or dies. And above all, see everything unseen! I could tell you weren't a spy because you didn't move your eyes properly. You just stand and stare like a cow. Watch how it should be done."

The eyes of the stranger whipped to and fro. Morgan simply stared at this sight, saying nothing.

"There you go, Mr. Cow," chirped the boy. "Gaping away. Lucky for you there are few bugs around this time of year!"

Morgan closed his mouth and fought down the urge to let it hang open again.

"Have you seen anything of the Royal Guard today?" asked the boy, changing his tone.

"Uh, no . . . " uttered Morgan. "That is, I guess not because I haven't seen anybody today."

"Don't you even know what the Royal Guard is?"

"No."

"Lindenbane's horsedwards."

"Oh, I've seen them."

"Today? Close by?"

"No, yesterday. They chased me, but I got away."

"You're lucky."

"Gobble the Dwarf found me. I'm staying with him."

"Gobble the Dwarf, hey?"

"You know him?"

"You should know enough to let me ask all the questions around here. Also you should remember not to surprise a g . . . guy going to the bathroom in the woods."

"Number One or Number Two?"

"What a question!" laughed the boy as he folded the blade of his knife back into its ivory handle. "My, you certainly are the stupidest little boy I've ever met."

And before Morgan could say anything to the boy who was no bigger than he was himself, the stranger said "Tra-la!" and ran off on his long spindly legs into the woods.

Morgan remained at the meeting place for a moment. The only indication that anyone had been there the minute before was a clashed leaf

on the grass; and a wind came up and blew that away.

The sun clouded over with a chill and Morgan turned to start jogging briskly in the direction of McAtom's cottage.

When Morgan arrived back within sight of the run-down shack half-buried in the hill, he saw Gobble humping back and forth, prying under bushes with a dried-out branch.

"Hey-ho!" cried out Morgan to Gobble who was in the act of crawling under an expanse of shrubbery. The dwarf jumped up from his knees and rivetted his eyes on the returning boy.

"Where the dickens have you been?" spluttered Gobble as soon as he was able to speak. "Didn't I tell you not to run off like that?"

"I only went a little ways."

"Growf," fumed Gobble. "Only after you've run up against the cairngorm-muncher or, much less to be feared, the Royal Guard, will you start to think about heeding my warning."

Saying nothing, Morgan stood head bowed, respectfully penitent, and wondered about cairngorm-munchers and what these horrendous-sounding beasts might look like.

"Well, no harm's done in any event," followed up Gobble. "Let's get to where we're going while we're still in one piece. McAtom tells me the Royal Guard have passed through these parts only this morning."

Trailing along behind Gobble's limp, Morgan pondered whether or not he should ask him to tell the story of the cairngorm-munchers. But he looked at the dwarf's disgruntled shoulders and decided to await a more propitious moment.

pubbing with gobble

Laughter and shouting reached Morgan's ears before he could see its source.

Then at the turn of the path, now well-worn and wide, a squat ivy-covered building loomed into view. Several horses were tied in front to iron rings bolted onto its graystone front. As the dwarf and the boy neared, a squeak . . . squeak . . . squeak escaped from the chains holding a wind-rocked sign above a pair of washboard doors. Year upon year of rain, snow and ice had obliterated all but a few traces of the name.

"What did that sign use to say?" Morgan asked Gobble, who had by this time mellowed sufficiently to be approached.

"I suppose it said The Pig's Bladder, as that's the name of the place," replied Gobble, pushing open one of the swinging doors.

"The Pig's Bladder!" gasped Morgan.

Then a storm of raucous laughter blew up behind the dwarf. An electric shock coursed through Morgan's body. "The Pig's Bladder!" he repeated to himself. "Just like Old Murdoch said! And oh my, Flesher-ton Costick told me he shouldn't ever catch me in a pub, tavern or beverage room!" For a moment, his bones felt hollow.

"Yes, that's the name," said Gobble. "Come on in."

And as it was too late to refuse, Morgan followed Gobble's back into the wash of tobacco smoke, the smell of freshly-baked meatpies and

the roar of voices. In the dark of the den, Morgan could only make out scattered groups of hunched shoulders and hats.

At the nearest table to the door, a group of three men turned to greet the newcomers.

"Oy, 'ere's Gobble come ter visit oos!"

"Unt he hass brought a frient!"

"Howshy goan, Gob?"

Gobble only replied with a tight little smile and an uplifted hand. He ushered Morgan to a round table on the opposite side of the room. Taking a place on a thick-cushioned bench, the boy glanced around the room. Light filtered bluely through the latticed windows on the other wall to spotlight the three men who had greeted them. The two were heavy-set while between them sat a wiry little imp. And beyond the stagger of smooth-topped tables were three more men, older and grayer, playing darts.

An ashtray clunked down on the tabletop. A short man, shaped somewhat like a pear, had appeared out of nowhere, rubbing his hands in his apron. He looked as if he could have once been jolly if it were not for people teasing him. "Greetingth, Mithter Gobble," he said. "Brought a friend, I thee."

"Roger," said Gobble, looking up, "I'd like you to meet Morgan, my good friend and fellow traveller. Morgan, this is our congenial host, Roger Mellon."

"Hi," said Morgan.

"Pleathed, I'm thure," nodded the barkeep.

"What's with the flag?" asked Gobble, waving a finger to the far wall. Morgan whipped his head around and, much to his surprise, saw the winged skull grinning red, white and black out of the gloom above the dartboard.

"Oh, that? King'th Orderth. Lindenbane thays that if we don't put up the Thkull and Wingboneth, we can't thtay open. I'm thorry. What'll you folkth have?"

"Two Guinness and two porkpies apiece," said Gobble, leaning back against the wall and bridging his fingers. The man turned to go, but Gobble caught him by the sleeve. "Oh, Roger, has Johnny Crown dropped in today?"

"Johnny Crown?" frowned the bartender. "Don't you mean Mickey Finn?"

"I mean Johnny Crown!"

"Oh, Johnny Crown!" exclaimed Roger Mellon all of a sudden. "Yeth thir, he wath looking for you. Yeth indeedy, now that I come to think of it." And then he trotted bumpily off.

"'Urry oop wi' me draft, Roger!" bellowed one of the three across the room. It was the red-faced man that drooped off every side of his chair. Tugging at his fire-red mustache, he pounded his empty beerpot on the table and caused the medals on his jacket to jangle and clink.

"Unt dun't linger mit mine, either, Rocher!" hissed out the other large man between two rows of tiny teeth. His eyes peered moistly out of his gray-meat face.

"Yah," piped up the littlest man. "Would you hop it?"

Whirling around upon the threesome, Roger scowled. "Ah, knock it off, you crapped guyth! You know I'm thort-handed thith afternoon." He swallowed and his bowtie almost did a summersault.

"That'th not all you're thort, Roger!" came the reply from the little imp. A terrific snort, a ha-ha and a fishlike giggle chased the barkeep back behind his tall and polished counter.

Mumbling to himself, Roger batted back the beertap to fill his pitcher. "You guyth will be the death of me," he spluttered. Then he banged a variety of glass doors open and shut and rattled his changebox louder than usual.

"You're the salt of the earth, Roger!" declared the imp.

And the table laughed even at that.

"Oy," shouted the ruddy man above the din. "Thut brings to me mind a riddo: Can anyone present, inclooding fair Roger, tull me the difference twixt a tavern and an elephant fart?"

Sniggers and snorts bubbled up in various parts of the room.

"Com'on Roger. You should know," shouted an old man from the back of the room.

The gray-meat man frowned thoughtfully. "Iss it becoss zey are both noisy and schmelly?"

Everyone chortled lustily.

"Oy, doosen't anybody knoo the proper answer?" shouted the riddle-master.

"Tell us, Old Tom. Tell us!" clamoured the beerdrinkers and the dart-throwers.

"Well, soon say that the myjor difference lies in the fact that the one is a barroom whilst the oother is a BARROOM!"

The room collapsed in hoarse spasms of laughter, guttural guffaws and even a few giggles.

On Roger's fingertips a silver tray, brimming full, rode into this sea of wild and rolling bodies and came to a stop in front of Gobble and Morgan. The fat little innkeeper plunked down two opened Guinness, two tin steins and four little napkin-wrapped pies. Into each stein, he poured half a sweating bottle. Gobble clapped a heavy coin onto the table, and Roger began fumbling in his pockets for change.

"Keep it, Roger," said the dwarf. "Feed the wife and kids."

"Thank you, thir. Thank you." And Roger bustled over to the other table with three sudsing stoupfuls of beer.

"Roger, ye're a veritable gem. "Ow about a free round?"

"Pay up, buthter or it'th five in the eye!"

As Roger was pulling ears and shaking money from the other table, Gobble took a long swig. "Ahhh," he sighed. "This is just what the doctor ordered."

"The doctor? What doctor?" asked Morgan as he grabbed a meatpie and started pushing it into his mouth.

"That's just an expression. It means it's good for you. Drink up now. I bought you two of the best."

"No thanks. You can have mine. I don't drink."

"Boggle and stuff! Guinness is good for you. Look, it says so right on the bottle."

Morgan took the half-empty bottle in his hand and held it up facing the window. "Well," he exclaimed. "So it does. Maybe I will have a bit of a sip, if it is good for me." Tilting the tin mug up to his face with both hands, Morgan allowed the black mysterious liquid to trickle down his throat. He emerged smiling, mustachioed with foam. "Guinness is good!" he announced to Gobble who just smiled.

Then with a terrific clatter, the twin doors flew open and in strode the most fantastic sight that Morgan had ever seen. The men at the next table burst into thunderous applause.

"Oy, it's Joanie lass!"

"Hurray!"

There in the doorway stood a plump red-head. Morgan simply stared as she jiggled out of her clothcoat. Roger rushed up to her, tray in hand. "Where in the world have you been, Mith McBone?" he spluttered. "Theeth rogueth have been running my poor legth off all afternoon with their inthane demandth, and you come thtrolling cathually in like you own the plathe! Mith McBone, thometimeth you upthet me conthiderably!"

Miss McBone, towering over Roger, glanced wearily in his direction as she busily reefed a knot in her apronstring behind her. Her bosom, overflowing her low-cut and tightly-laced bodice, bobbed up and down in a ray of sunshine. "Don't be so picky, Mister Roger," she snapped, patting her hair. "Can't a girl get a bit of rest?" With the chub of her hand she pounded back the chrome beertap. Then clipping Roger smartly on the nose with one of her enormous bulges, she flounced out into the room, her foam-topped pitcher in her fist.

"Oy, Joanie," cried out Old Tom. "We've missed ye, lass!"

"I can't honestly say I've been missing the likes of you, Tommy Atkins!" shot back the barmaid, topping up his tankard. "You'd think you didn't have a home to go to." Leaning over the table to get the other two, she received the flat of Old Tom's palm across her behind. "Mind yer flippin' manners," she snarled, "or I'll deal you a clip acrost yer ear!"

A variety of coins clinked down upon the tabletop and rolled around in circles through the beerpuddles.

"Giff us a kiss, Choanie," drooled the other larger man through sluglike lips.

The barmaid scooped up the money, counting with her lower lip. "I'll give you a kick in the pants, Eifer Cowpers, if you don't watch out!" Then she bustled away, stuffing a certain percentage down her cleavage. Eifer slunk back into his hulk and continued to watch her with half-closed eyes.

"Who're you going home with tonight, Joan my dear?" leered the impish little man.

"Not the likes of you, Brine Stackhouse!"

"Ooch," he moaned, "You're missing out on something great."

Morgan was happily drinking and taking all this in when he felt something in his beermug tickle his lip. He took another swig and the same thing happened. Frowning into the brew, he could see nothing, so he rolled up his sleeves and shoved in his whole chubby hand. "Gobble,

would you look at this," whispered Morgan after he had withdrawn a dripping coin. "There was a half-crown in my Guinness."

"Well now," exclaimed Gobble, taking it up. His eyebrows crawled up his forehead. "It certainly looks like one of King John's mintings."

"How did it get into my drink?"

"Now how would I know that, Morgan my boy?" smiled Gobble. "But I do know it means something. Did you know that since you've been drinking to King John, you're sworn to fight for him now?"

Morgan shook his head slowly. A slight wisp of foam rode on his upper lip.

"Yessir," nodded the dwarf seriously. "It's one of the oldest laws in the land." He then stood up and banged his stein on the table for attention. "Gentlemen, gentlemen," Gobble began. "I have an important announcement to make. I'm sure each and every one of you will be pleased to hear that my young friend Morgan here has just had a drink to King John. We've added another man to our company!"

Morgan just blinked.

All the beery faces smiled heartily down on him. Brine Stackhouse jumped to his feet and held up his mug to the small gathering.

"To the braw and doughty Morgan, me lads. Ho ho! To Morgan, one of us!" Eifer and Brine and Old Tom all clinked their beersteins together and fell to gulping down large mouthfuls.

"Buy the lad a drink!"

"Whut's he 'aving?"

"Guinness."

"The bloighter, a bleedin' aristocrat!"

"Joanie, Joanie! A Guinness for our lad!"

The barmaid came smiling up to Morgan with a full bottle and poured it slowly down the side of his tilted stein. "Here's to yer health, ducky," she cooed, hitching up one of her pale green satin stockings. "I've had me eyes on you for some time now," And she shot a wink over her shoulder as she floated back behind the counter.

"Thank you," stammered Morgan.

So Gobble, slipping the half-crown into his pocket, toasted the bewildered boy one more time while a dying hiss whistled out of the backroom where Roger had just tapped another keg.

The sun was just tipping the treetops when the three old dart-throwers started to drift off to their separate suppers.

"Thee you tomorrow!" Roger Mellon called after them.

At this point, Old Tom leaned back as far as he could in his wicker chair and burped. Expanding like a swollen frog, he stabbed a finger at the Skull and Wingbones and rumbled out either a curse or yet another burp. "I doon't see," he declared, "why, in the name of all thut's good and great, why we should be beholden to live oonder thut new rag they call a flag! Snoothin' but tommyrot! Now whut's the matter wi' the old flag, would anyone care to tell an old sowjer? If it were good enoof for me to fight oonder, it should be good enoof for me now!"

All eyes came to bear upon Old Tom who was holding his beerpot under his mustache as firmly as a conviction. Brine Stackhouse, eyes twinkling, winked across the room at Morgan. "Ah Tom," he said in a soft and flowing voice, "a new flag'll not sloo ye doon. Ye nuvver said boo when they p'inted the tavern roof, and ye've been foighting oonder it joost as wull uvver since!"

Even Morgan joined in the uproarious laughter and he helped to drive Old Tom further into his tankard. And when the old soldier noticed it was empty, he banged it down until the barmaid looked up from her compact.

Armed with yet a thicker crust of rouge on her cheeks and lips, Joan McBone moved languidly up to the rowdy table and poured each man another mugful. "Pay up, King Tom," she yawned, tapping her empty pitcher on her thigh. "It's your turn, if you remember correct."

"Mooney, now. From Old Tom? She wants mooney, mooney, mooney. Nootthin' but mooney!"

"Settle der account, Thomas," growled Eifer Cowpers. "It vas me tzat pait vor der last rount unt der rount bevor tzat!"

Brine nodded in agreement and blew the head off his beer.

"They're all like this, Morgan me boy," whispered Gobble into his beer. "But they'll come in handy yet, you'll see." Morgan did not quite understand, but Gobble's wink made him certain that what he had said was significant.

Old Tom fell to describing his ailing back. And as Gobble shifted along the bench closer to Morgan, the cronies at the next table

were all trying on each other's infirmities like hats.

"Well, Morgan, are you enjoying yourself today?" asked Gobble with a perfectly bland expression on his face.

"Yes . . . for the most part," whispered Morgan back. "But that woman is looking at me in a very odd manner and driving me up the wall."

"You like that, hey? Well, maybe we can fix something up for you after the meeting tonight."

Morgan drew his eyebrows together.

Noticing Gobble's gesture in her direction, Joan McBone cast the boy a smouldering regard from under her green-tinged eyelids and batted her spidery lashes at him.

Morgan swallowed. "Meeting? Meeting?" he eagerly followed up. "What meeting?"

"There is," started Gobble, measuring each word carefully, "a meeting, tonight, shortly after supper, in this very building, of various concerned individuals, who wish to put forward, their views on, and their solutions to, the problem, of great importance to all, which is facing, each and every one of us, this very hour!"

"Uh huh," nodded Morgan at each pause. "Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh." Joan squinted enticingly when he dropped his guard and looked up.

"W-w-what problem?" he asked.

"What problem? Weren't you just left a penniless orphan only the day before last and nearly barbequed and eaten by Lindenbane's monkey-troops?"

"Oh, that problem," exclaimed Morgan, "It's just the way you said it . . ."

"There is going to be a lot of important 'saying' tonight, so keep your ears open and eyes off the barmaids. Understand?"

"But," protested the boy weakly, "can't you tell her to keep her eyes off me?"

Gobble ranted on about all the trouble barmaids caused, but Morgan was interrupted by the clank of an iron penny falling on the floor. It rolled in a wide arc and came to rest, clattering like a plate, less than an arm's length from Eifer's left foot.

Eifer eyed the coin on the floor, then glanced carefully around the room. Morgan, lowering his eyes, turned back to Gobble only to peek up and see the gray-meat man oozing over on his bench. With eyes gleaming liquidly, Eifer closed his fingers upon the penny and it disappeared from sight.

To Morgan's surprise, Brine snatched up the unguarded tankard of ale, poured a healthy amount into his own mug, and just before Eifer straightened up a penny richer, clunked it down in front of Old Tom.

"Vere iss mine beer?" seethed Eifer, his small mouth puffing into a sneer. "You! You haf mine beer! Robber!"

Swelling with indignation, Old Tom rose unsteadily to his feet. "And joost whut was it thut ye calt me?"

"Schtealer of honest men's beer!" hissed Eifer.

"Oy yam noothin' o' the sort, oy'll have ye knoo!"

Sitting back comfortably, his mug covering a half-smile, Brine Stackhouse watched the two heavily-malted titans go to.

"Schwindler of der poor!"

"Bloody damned nuisance!"

Smash! responded Eifer. His big fist drove into Old Tom's soft underbelly.

Plop! resounded Old Tom's backside as he dumped back into his wicker chair.

"Go get him!" whispered Brine.

Eifer's cheeks contorted with twitches as Old Tom clambered up as majestically as he could. "Are you arsking me to retoorn your bleedin' beer?" he asked.

"Yesss!"

"Take it and wear it hoom then," growled Old Tom as he splashed half a tankardful up and down the full length of Eifer.

But before either of the two old men could start clubbing each other, the barkeepers came rushing up. Roger plunked Old Tom down again while Joan twisted Eifer's arm behind his back. Then, walking on his either side, Roger and Joan escorted the steaming Eifer Cowpers towards the door.

"Mut tzis iss a gross injustice," he hissed.

Then BANG! and he was out.

"You haf not seen der last off me!" came a shout from without.

The washboard doors dusted back and forth like hands after a job well done. "Neffter! Neffer! Neffer!"

"Thquabbling over a louthy pint of beer, you no-good-for-nothing barroom bumth!" scolded Roger. Then he ran to the door and shook his fist after Eifer's diminishing back. "Ninety-nine yearth. Do you hear? Ninety-nine yearth!"

Everyone in the tavern, with perhaps the exception of Roger, laughed loudly.

And as Gobble decided that they should have supper at the pub since they were there already, he ordered two large helpings of roast beef and yorkshire pudding.

"And a Guinness," added Morgan.

Tom and Brine traded quips and anecdotes over another pot of beer and packed their pipes with Eifer's forgotten tobacco.

Joan, holding Morgan's upturned palm in hers, told him his fortune.

"Ealoney," he said, withdrawing his hand. "I'll never amount to anything."

And Roger Mellon, the salt of the earth, sweated in the kitchen preparing meals for all.

the secret meeting

Once upon a youthful time
In the moony month of May,
Hairy Ted from his molehill spied
A horse of gossamer gay -- O!

Brine Stackhouse, a minstrel of sorts, was singing. In accompaniment, he plucked a lilting tune from the wire strings of his gittern. And as he sang, he danced up and down the full length of the tavern.

A multitude of voices, both high and very low, picked up the suspended "O!" and launched into the slower, more undulant pace of the refrain:

O the Horse, the Horse,
Ethereal Creature!
The Horse, the Horse,
The Horse, the Horse, so pure!

"Straightway sneaked unkempt Ted up, with bridle in hand behind," warbled Brine as he advanced upon Joan McBone who was making her way around the room topping up tankards and mugs with a foaming pitcher in either hand. Grinning fiendishly, he insinuated his hand about her waist. The barmaid frowned, of course, and moved off to the next table. So dragging along behind, Brine had to trill out the rest of the verse without the benefit of his instrument, "And struggled with the airy steed until she was confined -- O!"

Amidst chuckles and guffaws, the beerdrinkers lining the walls broke out again into the chorus. Joan had by this time half-carried

the minstrel all the way up to Morgan's table. "Finished yer Guinness already, duck?" she shouted over the roar of the singers. "You'll have to wait a mo' until I get back to the bar."

He hitched her to his barrow
 (To which he has this day),
 Took his seat and cracked his whip . . .

And unseen to everyone but Morgan, the minstrel's hand slipped down to Joan's behind and gave it a healthy pinch. " . . . and the fine horse ran away!"

Snort upon snort of beery laughter threatened the refrain, but Brine carried it along and proceeded to the end of the "Horse Wassail":

Teddy's tumbril stood quite fast
 With the balding boy inside;
 Renaming his dusty mound a Mount,
 He resolved to there abide.

Professor Ted now waves his hands
 From his mountaintop on high;
 In chilly winds he warms himself
 Shouting curses to the sky.

Despite the cold and lack of air
 And the people's constant laughter,
 November Ted still combs his hair
 And lives happily ever dafter.

Everyone clapped and shouted as Brine ran back to his table and a free pot of ale.

"Ahh," said Gobble. "There's Henry." He crooked a finger to a lump hulking in the doorway. Into the room and over to their table clumped this mountain of a man, his bald head glinting like a golden

bullet in the light of the oil-lamps. "Henry," said Gobble quickly, "this is one of our friends. His name is Morgan. Keep a friendly eye on him in case of trouble. And Morgan, this is Henry Hurler, the bouncer here and a good man to know."

"Hi," said Morgan. Henry's ham of a hand enveloped his and pumped his whole arm up and down.

"I'm a butcher too, if you need some meat," smiled the bouncer with his short, crooked teeth. And as his eyes were slightly crossed, only his left eye came to bear on Morgan, the other seemingly fixed upon the next table over.

"Keep close to the door, Henry," ordered Gobble. "And check out the people you don't know with me."

"Okay, boss," mumbled Henry and trundled back to fill up the hall.

A dark shadow that Morgan recognized as McAtom came scurrying in next, a paperbag tucked under his arm. "McAtom! Over here!" shouted Gobble over the thunder of the beerhall. "Did you bring the stuff?"

"Aye. 'Tis in the bag," affirmed McAtom. He drew up a chair and sat himself down. Instead of taking off his overcoat like everyone else, McAtom hugged his lapels tighter together and glanced at Morgan every second second.

"Let's take a peek," said Gobble, reaching for the brown paperbag in McAtom's tight grip. The dwarf pulled out a tin labelled Gulblarmie Tobacky and set it on the table before him. After crumpling up the bag, he began to pry off the lid. "Now, how does this stuff work?"

"Ye thraw a wee bit o' spunk into the centre o' it and ye mind yerr eyebrows."

Morgan looked into the tin to see what Gobble was fingering. Fine black powder was packed solid to the rim. The dwarf, placing his pipe at arm's length on the table, dropped a powdery pinch into the burning bowl.

Ffffffft!

An orange flame crawled out of the pipe. The air about filled with a pungent white smoke. "Well . . .," said Gobble. He put the lid back on. "Well!" he repeated and slipped the tobacco tin of mysterious black powder into his jacket pocket.

Joan came by with a large tankard for McAtom and bubbled it up to the brim. "What are you smoking in that wretched old pipe of yours?" she asked Gobble. "Old inner tubing?"

"Gulblarmie," snapped Gobble as he flicked Morgan's empty bottle with his fingernail. "And I bought it here."

Joan stuck out her tongue at the dwarf. "Be back in a mo' with yer Guirness, Morgie." And the boy smiled fuzzily at the prospect.

As Joan went tripping back to the bar, three more figures appeared in the darkened entrance. "Drinks, gentlemen?" she asked, balancing on one foot.

"Never!" replied a sharp voice. "Lips that touch Liquor shall never touch Mine!" And the two shadows alongside shrunk into their shoulders and shook their heads.

It was if Morgan had sat on a tack a foot long. "Oh no," he moaned to himself. "Flesherton Costick! Not here, of all places!"

And Flesherton Costick it was. Into the smoke and rumble, he stiffly strode, turning neither to left nor right. He plumped himself down on a bench directly across the aisle and lanced an eagle eye around the pub. Up shot his pure-white eyebrows when he spied Morgan sinking behind the hedge of empty bottles and beerpots. "Ahem," he coughed. And without a sign of recognition, he sniffed visibly and made room for his two companions.

Gobble leaned over to Morgan. "Keep your eye on those birds in gray suits. Abner Funk on the left, Flesherton Costick in the middle, and Dildo Daggers. They're weird."

"I know the one in the middle," whispered Morgan, "and unfortunately he knows me."

"Ahh, then you know what I'm talking about. Oh, look here!" Gobble pointed to a tall, dark man striding in past Hurler. "It's Marshall C. Bridewell. Glad to see him here. A good man in a tight spot."

And before Morgan could gasp, "Not the Marshall C. Bridewell!", the very man himself clumped his jet-black riding boots all the way to the rear of the hall and clapped his whip on the corner table. Old Tom jumped two inches into the air and squeezed closer to his friend Brine Stackhouse.

"Beer!" barked out Bridewell.

"Yessir!" smiled Joan McBone weakly. "Coming right up." And as she passed Morgan's table, she hissed out the corner of her mouth. "I hope you don't mind me giving him yer Guinness, duck, but he's a very thirsty man."

And before Gobble had settled back down, there came the bite of bootheels on the pavement out front. "Now who could this be?" asked the dwarf, half rising. He rubbed his hands as if it were his birthday party.

The twin doors swung open and in trotted two tiny men wrapped in long grogram coats, fur caps on their heads and red woollen scarves streaming out behind. Gobble plumped back down. "Oh no, not those two!"

"No, no, no, no, no! No Mack, no!" argued the one, as he led the way to the rear of the bar. His skimpy mustache, trembling with passion, crept around the corner of his mouth to collaborate into a tangled goatee. "Ze basique dutee of ze revolutionaire ees to be more zan juste revolteeng. It ees to be uncondectationally an' constrocteevely deestroctif!"

"No, no, no, John" countered the other, shaking his smooth-skinned face back and forth, back and forth. "His basic duty is to be simply and utterly revolting. Humanistic government is merely a by-product of the people's revolution!"

The two of them, completely oblivious to the crowd around them, took over a corner of the beerhall and carried on their discussion.

"Those men," said Gobble, "are two of the most brilliant people in the room, John Clod and Mack St. Orange. I only hope that they don't start talking at the meeting or we'll never get anywhere."

Morgan watched with interest as the lively little men flashed their eyes, struck the table and flung their hands about. But then a shadowy shape crept into the corner of his eye. It was the familiar slink of Eifer Cowpers who had come to take up the seat he had vacated earlier on that afternoon.

"Oy, Joanie," cried Old Tom's voice out of the jumble, "Anoother three pints here!"

"I believe Old Eifer is going to buy us a drink," explained Brine to anyone that might be listening.

The door opened once more and inwalked a tall, handsome man impeccably dressed in tweed, topped with a derby. The beerhall stilled to murmurs. Leaning upon a blue-black umbrella, he remained at the bar and gave his tasteful handlebar mustache a twist.

"The meeting can start now," whispered Gobble in Morgan's ear. "Alleyne Frogoni's here! The mayor of Tubbersport said he'd be coming later on, but we can start without him."

Joan McBone hurried up to the fine figure at the bar. Digging into her bosom, she produced a handful of silver which she pressed into his white-gloved hand. Slipping the coins into his jacket pocket, the man advanced calmly to the head of the hall. He snapped his fingers and an absolute silence fell over all.

Alleyne Frogoni nodded to the men at large, then extended two fingers to Gobble.

"Very good to see you here, sir, heh heh. Yessir," said Gobble, his hands wrapped around the Frogoni fingers. "Uh, Mister Frogoni, I'd like very much to introduce to you one of our good friends. This is the Morgan, of whom McAtom told you this morning. And Morgan, Mister Frogoni needs no introduction, heh heh."

The tall man fixed a steely eye upon Morgan for the longest time, then nodded curtly.

"Uh . . . hello, Mister Fargoni," stuttered Morgan. But the man was already halfway down the aisle. As he passed, the men would rise to their feet, tip their hats and mutter a "How are you?" Even John Clod and Mack St. Orange bowed and scraped. But Alleyne Frogoni did not acknowledge a one of their greetings.

Old Tom and Eifer Cowpers vacated their table, squeezing over towards Flesherton Costick and his crew, while Roger Mellon came rushing out from behind his bar for the first time that evening to wipe the table clean with a damp rag and dust off the bench.

Then, pinching his trousers at the knees, Alleyne Frogoni sat down.

Only Brine Stackhouse and Marshall C. Bridewell remained unruffled. The minstrel sat grinning like an idiot at Alleyne Frogoni's elbow, while the big dark man simply glowered out of the corner, his foot still parked on the bench.

A tiny glass of whiskey in her hand, Joan McBone ran up to the newly-cleaned table and set it down. Without looking up, she curtsied and hurried back to her duties.

Then Alleyne Frogoni snapped his fingers and the barroom noise came rushing back in the door.

"Frogoni!" hissed Gobble. "Not Fargoni!"

"Frogoni," repeated Morgan with a hint of a slur. "Frogggoni!" Gobble frowned and tugged at Morgan's sleeve.

"So who'sh Alleyne Frogggoni?" asked the boy in a voice that was louder than it should have been. "Who'sh Alleyne Frogggoni anyhow?"

"Shhh, not so loud!" shushed Gobble. "He owns, rather, owned just about everything on the island before the dwarfs took over. Rumours have it that he still has a considerable fortune stashed away somewhere. Anyway, he's willing to lend our cause a helping hand as he's a friend of mine. And remember, he can buy and sell you. So keep your mouth shut!"

"Buy and shell me . . ." muttered Morgan to himself. He turned around to get a better view of this Alleyne Frogoni. But just as he was wondering why the third finger of the rich man's right hand should raise ever so slightly above the tabletop like it did, Gobble jumped up and started banging his metal drinking pot on the table.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," the dwarf began. "We are gathered here together in a time of stress and unhappiness, of unease and oppression, in fear of annihilation of ourselves, our families and our friends."

All faces, sober and otherwise, focused on Gobble. There were solemn nods and a few beercans rapping in agreement.

"'Ere, 'ere," muttered Old Tom and took a drink.

"Our purpose here tonight," continued Gobble, "is to determine what action is necessary, what action is possible and what action we will take."

"That's what I like to hear!" piped up Brine Stackhouse. "Good solid planning!"

Instead of frowning, Gobble continued speaking slowly and clearly. "As most of you know, Mayor Wasserman of Tubbersport is joining us later on tonight and will have a considerable amount to say in any final decision we may arrive at. But we can begin by discussing the problem at hand and advancing suggestions as to an effective remedy agreeable to all."

"Harrumph," interjected Flesherton Costick. "Mister Gobble, my colleagues and I strenuously object to the sympathetic Tone which you employ to Whitewash the hideous, sadistic and unconstitutional Menace that imperils our beloved Fatherland. Why don't you call a spade a Spade and a dwarf a Dwarf? Perhaps then we Might be able to get somewhere."

"Oy, a dwarf's a bleedin' dwarf, orroight!" agreed Old Tom.

"Your 'problem at hand'," screamed out John Clod, "ees notting more zan a deespeecable meelectary coup, an eegoistique an'

violent manoeuver on ze part of zose dogs of dwarts to oppress an' deprive us of our natural rights! Conseeder ze major evils een ze world today: Look at ze blatant exploitation of ze teenminors een West Sulpock! Look at ze greedy eentervention een ze Corpuddle lacrosse play-offs! An' now look at ze present seetuation! My house was broken an' entered and soome teef stole all my furniture! Nastee! Notting but nastee! We need action, an' action now! I tink I should conduct zis meeteeng, hey? I promise I weel show no merci to zose peegs of dwarts. Moi for Mr. Chairman, hey?"

"Me too!" shouted Mack St. Orange as he pounded his stein on the table.

A rumble of voices arose from many throats, overpowering any one speaker. Gobble held up both of his hands. "Hold on, hold on," he shouted over the din. "Everyone can't talk at once. When someone wishes the floor, he'll have to hold up his hand."

Hands shot up from every corner. The room fairly bristled with wildlly waving hands.

"Me!"

"Moi, Moi!"

"No, me!"

"Pick me, Gobble, pick me!"

"Hold on, everybody! I'll choose the first speaker myself!" screamed the dwarf. "Everybody sit down and shut up!"

But the clamour and the roistering roared on. Morgan was just marvelling that the noise seemed to be getting louder and louder with

no seeming end in sight when a massive voice bellowed out above the hubbub.

"Dwarts!" It came from Hurler standing in the doorway. "Dwarts! It's a raid! De dwarts is comin'!"

It was true! Morgan knew it was. The thunder of hoofbeats rattled the windows and the napkin holders on the tables, and underfoot the floor drummed out in surprise.

"Oh no!" screamed Joan. "Oh no!"

John and Mack jumped up, nearly knocking over their table, and ran about the room. Guttural shouts raged without and someone began blowing out the oil-lamps. Morgan stared at Joan McBone, standing beside the bar, her knees together, her hands in her apron.

"Evverbuddy get out der identity cards!" shouted Hurler into the darkening air. "Here dey come!"

Morgan froze to the bench.

Dwarts! Identity cards!

Before he knew what was happening a dozen hands were grabbing at him, shoving him towards the bar. "We've got to get you out of here," hissed Gobble in his ear. And out the corner of his eye Morgan could see Hurler braced in the doorframe, silhouetted against a skyful of dismounting horsedwarts.

"Aurright! Aurright! Let us in! Out the way!"

"Confuscate those horses!"

A door in the floor opened and Morgan found himself being lowered by Roger Mellon's hands which never before had seemed so large and so strong.

"Here, take this!" whispered Gobble harshly. "And don't make a noise 'til I call you."

Morgan's free hand clasped the tobacco tin.

Suddenly Roger released him: he fell and darkness swallowed him.

swords, sorcery and surprises

Plop!

Morgan landed on what felt like a meager sack of potatoes. He rolled over and moaned.

"Ooh!"

And he lay dazed upon his back with the potato sack at his side. Too many things were happening.

For one, the darkness was not darkness. A tiny prick of light punctured the black giving vague hints about the cellar: it was dirt-floored, damp and crowded with beerkegs, old doorframes and dust-covered junk.

The whole mess reeled elliptically about Morgan's puzzled head.

The floor above thundered with heavy boots and shock centuries of dust down into his young eyes. Half-heard guttural commands grated through the rafters.

"Oop . . . oop . . . oop," gasped the potato sack. It squirmed.

"Blup," burped Morgan in reply.

"Ooooh, I'm going to get you," the potato sack threatened.

"Don't be silly. Potato sacks don't talk."

"I'm not a potato sack!" the potato sack insisted. "And I'm going to . . . YOU! Not you again!"

Lolling his dizzy head towards this troublesome bag, Morgan discovered that it was not in fact lying, or for that matter a potato sack, but something else again: the figure of a winded boy. "The Boy

in the Forest!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"It's none of your business, but I'm spying on your meeting."

The boy sat up rubbing his stomach and added, "Do you jump on people everywhere?"

"No . . . but why would you want to spy on us? Some meeting! There was nothing but shouting and yelling and then the dwarfs came."

"Maybe we had better get out from under the trap-door then. And cover up the light, too."

The boy jumped up and folded a flap of tin across the face of a small lantern which was actually just a cut-up tomato can. Following after, Morgan braced himself heavily on one hand and rose unsteadily to his numb and distant feet. "Oh, that Guinness!" Past rows and rows of wooden beerkegs, iron pots and vats he staggered and stumbled. Steadily rising at an angle, the dirt floor forced Morgan to duck the lowering rafters.

The two boys sat down against a heat-sucking stone wall. Overhead, the scuffle of chairs and shoes blended with the harsh demands of the dwartraiders and the apologetic replies of the men. "Gaurm," grated one voice. "What're you doing here tonight?" Morgan listened, but the muttered answer was impossible to hear.

Below, the dark-haired boy turned to the fairer. "My name's Arthur."

"I'm Morgan."

"Hi."

Heavy footsteps clumped across the cellar ceiling and stopped. "Lemme see your card, you!" growled the voice from above. It sounded like the dwarf kappun that had burned Morgan's home and family.

"What's your name?"

"Brine J. Stackhouse is my nem, sir!" chirped a familiar voice.

"What kind of card is that? Fish and Game Association? Come around, Stackhouse, come around. We know what to do with smart guys like you. Matt! Yerk this overgrown shitska!"

Crash! A chair splintered. Clang! Heavy boots moved in to upset a tableful of steins, both full and empty. Leather-soled footfalls dragged a kicking and scraping weight towards the door. "That's what happens to smart guys," growled the dwarf officer. A respectful silence followed.

And unseen to all, a drop of the spilled beer escaped through a crack in the barroom floor to land sizzling and spitting on the hot lid of Arthur's candle-lantern. Arthur turned to Morgan. "I guess they arrested somebody . . ."

"Yes," replied Morgan after a pause, "You have to have identity cards or something."

"Do you have one?"

"No."

"Me neither."

The two boys stared into the flickering crack around the lantern's tinflap door. What silence there was seemed very solemn. Overhead the brutal footsteps drummed on and on. The floor creaked as people

were herded here and there for questioning.

"This would be quite boring, if it weren't so scary," commented Morgan. He rested his chin in his hand and sighed.

"It is!" said Arthur, glancing over. He seemed to catch sight of the golden glint on Morgan's finger. He took up Morgan's hand and studied the ensign. A slight frown passed over his brow as he looked Morgan in the eye. He was about to say something, but then he fell back. "Say," he blurted out, breaking the cellar-silence, "do you want to be friends?"

"Sure," shrugged Morgan. "But I'm not too sure we'll be around that much longer."

"Perhaps not, but I hope so."

"I hope the dwarfs don't come down here."

"They won't," replied Arthur, "unless they find the trapdoor under the rug."

"There's a rug over the door?"

"Uh huh, I've checked. Roger Mellon's big secret. In fact, I live down here, but nobody knows. Do you have a sword?"

"No."

"Come here then."

The two of them crawled on hands and knees across one end of the cellar until they came to a cobwebbed corner. Arthur drew back a dirty rag to reveal a gleaming sword plunged deep into a stone.

"There you go," smiled Arthur. "A present from me to you."

The sword's brilliance fixed Morgan to the spot. Even in the dull light of the beercellar, a radiant blue glow surrounded the sword much like a candle's halo. And when the meager rays from the lantern played upon the blade's polished surface, the beercellar gloom caught fire.

"Pull it out and it's yours," said Arthur.

A cobalt flush covered Morgan's face as he scuffled over to it on his knees. He put one hand, then the other on the swordhilt and tightened his grip. A flash of energy raced throughout his body, shook him to the core. Morgan tugged at it, but the sword would not budge.

He pulled harder. Still it would not come.

One more time, he strained until his fingers ached and his muscles quivered; and yet the sword stood fast. "Whew," huffed Morgan noisily. "Nobody but nobody can get that out of there."

"Pardon?" asked Arthur perplexed. "I just stuck it in there this morning." And in response to a gentle twist from Arthur's wrist, the sword yielded gracefully and allowed itself to be drawn out. "Here," he said, handing the sword to Morgan. "Now no dwarfs will get you."

Morgan cradled the marvellous weapon in his two hands. Surprisingly enough, it was not heavy, but rather light. "Oh my, oh my," he breathed, his eyes shining bright blue. "Where on earth did you get this?"

"Uh . . . My father won it in a poker game."

"Are you sure it's all right to give it to me?"

Arthur fixed him with a steady gaze. "Yes, I'm very sure. But don't just sit there drooling on it. Try it out! You won't scratch it."

Morgan spit on his hands and gripped the handle. Swinging it at a rafter, he found that at the moment of impact the sword strove forward as though it had quadrupled in weight. Into the two-by-eight splashed the shining blade and, what's more, carried on through with no effort at all. "Holy mackerel!" he exclaimed. "I hardly hit with it!"

"That was only a rotten old board," said Arthur. "Try it on the stone wall."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to damage your sword any."

"Garbage! You couldn't chip that blade if you tried. It's dwarf-work. Besides, it's yours now."

"Well, O.K. If you say so." Squeezing the swordhilt all the harder, Morgan drew it back as far as he could and let loose against a head-sized granite boulder.

Boorang!

Blue sparks flew everywhere. Morgan gaped at what he had done. Halfway up the wall, a hole the size of a fist gave silent testimony to the sword's worth. And turning to the blade, he discovered that Arthur was right. Not the slightest dent or scratch could be seen anywhere upon it.

Morgan smiled bashfully at his first sword. "Gee, Arthur. Thanks a lot! This is a neat sword."

"You're entirely welcome. But you can see why I prefer a switch-blade. Can you imagine peeling an apple with Caliburn?"

"Caliburn?"

"Caliburn. The sword's name. Now what are you going to give me?"

"Hunh?"

"I gave you a kedge for investiture. Now to complete the bond, you have to give me a present."

"Oh," said Morgan. "I didn't know that."

"So we can be friends-in-keeping."

"Oh, heh heh, of course. Friends and keeping. Now let's see," mumbled Morgan as he patted his jacket pockets. He juggled the Gulblarmie tin from one hand to the other as he searched. But his pockets were empty. "I'm sorry," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't seem to have anything on me. Oh! I just remembered. How about this ring?"

Arthur drew back and shook his head. "I've already got one." He held up his left hand and on his ringfinger shone a solid band of gold. "What's in the tin? Tobacco?"

"No. Magic Powder. It's not mine."

"Magic Powder? What's it do?"

Morgan paused for a moment. "It goes Ffft!"

Arthur crinkled up his forehead. "You mean it explodes?"

"Yes . . . I guess you'd say so."

"Let's try some." Arthur set the lantern down between them and Morgan handed over the tin. After prying off the top, Arthur peered into the tin, then poked at the murky contents with his finger. "Hmm!"

He poured a mound into the palm of his hand. "How do you make it work? Do you have to say an incantation or something?"

"No. Just toss it in the fire. Not too much though . . ."

"Some Magic Powder! Toss it in the fire indeed!" And before Morgan could repeat his warning, Arthur had dumped a generosity into the wavering flame between them.

FWAP!

Both boys were hit in the face with a flower of fire. Morgan heard the tin can hopping, spinning and slithering down the gradient of the cellar floor. Brilliant red roses, diamond sparkles and purple whirlpools danced everywhere, but soon they faded away into darkness.

"Wow!" gasped Arthur. "That stuff has possibilities."

"It blew the candle out."

"I've got another one tucked away here somewhere. And a flint. Ah, here we go." Morgan heard steel on rock and saw sparks squirt out of the black. Two more times, and Arthur's tinderbox began to glow. A white taper burst alive with flame and the beer cellar crept back around them. "Wow!" repeated Arthur. "Was that ever good! Hey, do you know what we can do with this stuff?"

"What?"

Without answering, Arthur scrambled down into the main area of the cellar to scrounge amongst the beerkegs, old bed springs, stove parts and other interesting pieces of junk. After poking around behind the third keg, Arthur emerged smiling with a huge pewter pot in hand.

"This isn't exactly what I had in mind, but it'll work just the same." He sat down beside the old lantern, its tinflap ripped into a lop-sided grin. After dripping wax from the tilted candle onto a stone keg-support, Arthur pushed its base into the cooling puddle until the candle was welded upright. The light being steady, he went on to pour the entire contents of the tobacco tin into the pewter drinking pot.

"Would you hand me that doorknob, please?" he asked Morgan. He pointed to a door lying against the beerkeg support. Morgan tugged at the knob, but only succeeded in bringing down a thick layer of dust upon his head.

"It's hooked on tight. I can't get it off."

"Use your sword, dummy."

"Oh, I forgot about my sword." With one flashing swipe, Morgan severed the doorknob cleanly from its base. Arthur caught it on the first bounce and dropped it in the pot.

"It's not tight enough," Morgan heard him mutter. Wrapping the knob in someone's old shirt seemed to satisfy the spindly boy. He pushed the lumpy load into the pot's mouth and with a broken chair-leg he rammed the load home. "Now poke a small hole right here. No, here. Not too big now."

After he had seen black powder well up out of the hole he had made, Morgan withdrew Caliburn and asked, "What is it?"

"This," grinned Arthur widely, holding the renovated beer pot up by its handle, "is a dwarf-getter."

But before Morgan could ask Arthur to explain, the end of the cellar exploded in light. "Morgan!" cried out a familiar voice. "It's safe to come out now. The dwarts have gone." Morgan sighed. It was Gobble at the trap-door.

Arthur snapped the candle off its base. Shadows swirled around.

"Are you coming?" asked Morgan. "You might as well come to the meeting since you're my friend."

"I intend to. Don't forget Caliburn."

Morgan checked to see if he was holding his sword. He was, and tucking it in his belt, he ran towards the dusty-yellow shaft of light at the cellar's larger end. Roger Mellon was reaching down. He grabbed Morgan by the hands and hefted him out. "My goodneth," he exclaimed, "where on earth did you get thuch a thword ath that? Not in my thellar, thurely!"

Gobble took it from Morgan and turned it over and over. Brilliant rays of light flashed into his eyes. Gobble whistled.

"My friend Arthur gave it to me."

"Arthur?" frowned Gobble. "What Arthur?"

"Down there."

Roger and the dwarf peered into the small doorway and saw Arthur's candle-lit face shining up at them. "Well, hello there!" said the barkeep, stooping to help up the stranger in his cellar. Arthur handed him the candle. Gobble stared at the sword, then again at the boy down the hole.

"Hello," said Arthur, as he emerged from the cellar. "I've been living in your basement. I hope you don't mind."

"Tho that'th where my betht candleth and meat-pieth have been dithappearing. Well, well, well!"

"Let's get on with the meeting!" growled Gobble, slapping the sword against Morgan's stomach. "You stand there and don't move." The boy stood beside the bar and looked out at the glum roomful of faces. As Morgan suspected, Brine's mischievous face was nowhere in sight. Then Arthur sat on the floor by his side.

"Now look what they've gone and done," lashed out Gobble shaking his fist at the sad creatures before him. "They took Brine Stackhouse off to the racks. Who knows who'll be next. It could be any of us. Or all of us for that matter!" His face was contorted with rage. "Identity cards! Bullshit! Next we're going to have rings in our noses! Then they'll be able to lead us about like cows . . . or pigs! And why? I'll tell you why. Because just half an hour ago you were all sitting there hollering 'Me! Me! Me!' You all wanted to be king. If this outrageous behaviour of yours continues, I'm going to walk right out that door and never come back. And you'll just sit there on your fannies shouting 'Me! Me! Me!'"

Gobble paused. Morgan could hear Old Tom swallowing heavily.

"You're going to shout 'Me! Me! Me!' all the way to the chopping block!" the dwarf continued. "And it'll serve you right. You don't even realize that we've got an enemy to fight. How many more

Brine Stackhouses are they going to have to haul off before you wake up to the fact that we've got to work together? Right now, those toad-eating dwarfs are probably breathing their stink into Brine's face, prying out his eyeballs with their fingernails."

The blue tobacco smoke in the air made Morgan's eyes smart. A tear ran down the blotchy-red cheek of Old Tom. John Clod and Mack St. Orange raged silently, gripping their table, while Eifer Cowpers stared steadily ahead. Even Marshall C. Bridewell, who had not said a single thing before the raid, looked sheepish. And Alleyne Frogoni twisted his waxed mustache.

"You've got no cause to grumble," shouted Gobble at the penitent faces. "You've got your beer! Drink it! Sit on your asses! Be content with murderous dwarf oppression. It's not your task to make reply! Yours not to reason why! Yours but to drink and die!" And as if they were the most disgusting creatures in the world, Gobble turned sharply away from the sorry circle of men. Ramming his hands into his pockets, he stalked back and forth in front of them and fumed privately. Everyone, including Morgan, stirred guiltily.

Finally the dwarf broke the uncomfortable silence. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do," he said in a quiet, very reasonable voice. "I'm going to give you one more chance. But!" He held up his finger. "You'll have to co-operate."

"Oh, we wull," sobbed Old Tom into his beer. "Oh, we wull."

"I know you will, Tom," said Gobble generously. "That's why I'm going to give you a leader."

"Ain't you going to lead us?" asked Old Tom.

"No, that's not my task," Gobble replied. "My task is but to deliver you your rightful leader who has miraculously appeared in the Black Forest for the express purpose of fulfilling your historic mission. I'm going to give you a leader that will lead you cheering to triumphant victory with a burning sword. A leader that will murder wrong with right. A leader that will rid this island of those warmongering dwarfs, drive them down to the beaches and spill their green blood into the rising tide."

"Who is he?" shouted out several voices. "Who'll save us from the dwarfs?"

"Open the windows!" screamed Gobble. He clenched his fists and beat them on the bar. "The word 'dwarf' stinks like a rotten corpse. Dwarfs make me physically sick; the mere sight of them does this. I cannot even hate the dwarf. I can merely despise him. He has raped our people, soiled our ideals, weakened the strength of our island, corrupted morals. He is the poisonous eczema on the body of our sick island. Either he destroys us or we destroy him. Peace? Why, could the lungs make peace with the tubercular bacillus?" He whipped about and stabbed a finger at the bouncer. "Henry. You've worked with the dwarfs. Tell us what you think of them. Do you like having a dwarf for a king?"

Henry Hurler shuffled from one foot to the other and muttered, "I don't like dem dwarfs at all."

"Pardon?" asked Gobble. "Speak up! You're among friends. Tell us!"

"I'd never have a dwarf for a king," the blushing bald man declared in a louder voice. A cheer went up. Then Hurler threw his shyness aside, beat his barrel-chest and let go with his roar of a voice. "I'd never have a dwarf for a king, specially like dat Lindenbane guy! Cus dey're doity. I mean really filty. I've woiked wid dem and I should know. Dey catch toads hopping about in de sewers, fry dem up in grease and den eat dem!"

"Oooog! How horrid!" wailed Joan McBone at the top of her lungs. "We've got to do something!"

"But what?" shouted a dozen voices.

"We want a revolution," hissed McAtom in the lull that followed.

"Hurray! Revolution! Freedom!"

"That's the spirit!" encouraged Gobble. He smiled around at the dozen or so enlightened faces.

"Oy, I'll drink to thut!"

"Down the Dwarfs!" cried out Flesherton Costick. "Up the People!"

Abner Funk and Dildo Daggers rose cheering and waving miniature King John Flags. Soon everyone was standing up screaming joyously.

Eyes bright with reflected lamplight, John Clod and Mack St. Orange leaped on top of their table and began jumping up and down.

"We'll riot in the cities," sang out Mack. "We'll riot in the hay."

"We'll riot een ze suburbs," returned John. "We'll riot sin away."

"We'll rict, riot, riot . . . Forever and a day!"

"Hold on zere, not forevaire," John objected. "Not forevaire an' a day: We'll riot eento power--zen put rioters away!"

Joyfully the two little men linked arms and did a clumsy table-top jig. "But until that happy hour," they sang in unison, "we'll riot night and day, demanding riot-taxes our expenses to defray!" And they jumped onto the floor to be met with a hearty round of applause.

"Free beer!" declared Gobble. "Free beer for everybody!"

A monumental shout went up, but not as high as the bartender's eyebrows. "Don't worry," hissed Gobble into Roger Mellon's ear, "I'm going to make you a captain. Captain of Cannon Fodder!"

Roger stood biting his lip and wiping his hands on his apron. He swallowed and his bowtie wiggled. "All right," he said quietly. "All right." He clapped his hands for Joan McBone and before long, the riotous storm of applause had softened into happy guzzles and burps.

"Our people," continued Gobble, taking full advantage of the lull, "have been forced under a yoke. The island's natural rulers are reduced to slave labour, from high up to low down and from low down to high up. The tide is right to restore Law, Order, Justice and Man to the Isle of Tilantes. Your Island! My Island! Our Island!"

Malty mouths roared approval as beercans hit tabletops.

"Oorah!"

"Hurrah!"

"Huzzah!"

The whole room was now aglow. In front of the energetic little dwarf hope shone on the once gray faces. John and Mack were clenching

their fists, quaking with contained excitement. Flesherton Costick wiped the sweat from his brow. Old Tom was openly sobbing like a child. And Alleyne Frogoni lifted his glass to Gobble. Morgan felt himself getting hot and cold. He didn't know what was happening to him. His pulse was alive as drums in his ears, booming volley after volley. Abner Funk and Dildo Daggers were up and shouting "Hurrah! Hurrah!" and no one even noticed.

And the dwarf at the head of the beerhall spoke on. "But we won't get there by speeches and resolutions. We need a holy thunderstorm!" And at that instant Morgan felt Hurler's strong hands under his armpits lifting him high above the heads of Gobble, Arthur, McAtom and the rest. Soaring in the air, he felt himself come to rest on the glassy top of the bar. Gripping Caliburn all the firmer, he shook the hair out of his eyes and beheld a multitude of upturned faces at his feet.

A subtle hiss caught Morgan's attention. "Don't fall over, whatever you do," warned Gobble. "And don't say a thing unless I ask you a question. All right? Now just stand up there and look smart!"

And then Hurler appeared with the abandoned gittern in his hands. Strumming it gently to see if it was still in tune, Gobble turned back to face the crowd. He held up his hand until he had absolute silence. "Morgan, Son of John," the dwarf asked in a rumbling voice so that all could hear, "when exactly were you born?"

The question seemed an odd one to Morgan, but Caliburn at his side throbbed strength into him. "The Year of Early Frosting O'er in April's Spring of Gladness," replied Morgan in a voice which even surprised himself. It was deep and rich. A few chords echoed his answer. Gobble was playing the gittern.

"Riddle-time!" shouted the dwarf. And when the melody came around to the beginning once again, Gobble broke out into a familiar strain.

The Year of Early Frosting O'er
In April's Spring of Gladness
Tells a tale of who
Of which queen so true
In April's Spring of Sadness?

The Black Forestrians, who loved riddle-posing and riddle-solving almost as much as they loved their beer, replied without a second's pause for thought.

Queen Ygena is her name;
She's sad, she's sad to crying
For her baby's gone
Ta'en far beyon
And she's left there sorely sighing.

Smiling and nodding, Gobble paced back and forth in front of the crowd and treated them to some fancy fingerwork before he posed the next riddle.

With eyes as blue as August skies
 And hair of golden yellow,
 Who lost her child,
 Was driven wild
 And drowned herself in the snow?

The people's unified voice, only slightly ragged at the edges,
 replied immediately:

Queen Ygena, Wife of John,
 In April's Spring of Madness
 Did take her life
 In time of strife
 In April's Spring of Sadness.

Gobble nodded. Then he put up his finger to show that the
 third, the most difficult, and the most important riddle was yet to
 come:

With eyes as blue as August skies
 And hair of golden yellow,
 Who is this lad
 So simply clad,
 This tow'ring little fellow?

This time the response was neither quite so spontaneous nor so
 certain. But after Gobble had plucked out the tune on the gittern one
 more time, a few of the brighter beerdrinkers joined together to dis-
 play their cunning riddle-wit:

Kingly Morgan, Son of John,
 In April's Spring of Sadness,
 A prince was born
 On a chilly morn
 In April's Spring of Gladness.

Gobble stopped playing. In a half-turn towards the boy on the bar, Gobble presented Morgan to the circle of singers with an upturned palm. There was a stunned silence.

"Oy," exclaimed Old Tom, putting his hand up to his moustache.

"It's the bleedin' prince oop there, Oy tull ye! The bleedin' prince!"

"The king!" thundered out the room. "The new king!"

"All rise!" growled out Hurler from the corner.

Everybody rose.

"All kneel!"

Everyone knelt.

"To the king!" declared Gobble, raising on high a borrowed pot of beer.

And on bended knees, the crowd scrambled for their beermugs.

"Ooch!"

"Ouch!"

"Be damned!"

"To the king!" cried Gobble joyously.

"To the king!"

Gallon upon gallon of the foamy draft bound the motley lot into a hallowed fellowship. They were Servants of the King All. Everyone was dumbfounded, of course, as well as overjoyed; but the most surprised person in the beerhall that night was Morgan himself. "Is it possible?" he asked himself. "Am I really the rightful heir to the throne? Now if I were king, I couldn't very well be Old John's third son as I have been all my life, could I? But I would be John's son just the same . . .".

He burped and lost himself momentarily in a malty haze. "Oh well, in any event, I'm still John's son!"

A rousing cheer brought him out of his private mumblings and he discovered Caliburn lofted before him, gleaming out bluish-white rays. What was more, he was holding onto the handle. The room came back to itself again and there was Gobble down on the floor in front of him holding forth. Morgan tuned into the dwarf's trailing words and was swept away upon a tale of cabbage-patches, kings, wood-cutters and dwarts.

All this seemed so long ago! Morgan listened as though he were hearing it for the first time. "But it's not!" he said. "It's my story!" And each word struck him like a lightning-blow.

"And," resonated Gobble's metallic voice in the marrows of the men before him, "after bravely, but unsuccessfully attempting to save his foster family from a raging horde of horsedwarts, the valiant prince, the then unknown heir to the throne, the pride of King John (had he but lived)--Morgan, this same spirited lad you see before your very eyes, barely escaped with his life, was forced to flee the subhuman brutality of the dwarts and hurl himself, broken and bleeding, under a gorse bush. There our unfortunate hero fought off black fits of unconsciousness until he had unfastened his lowly mule Mary from the tangled wreckage of his chariot. One last unselfish act before what might have been his last breath. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you King Morgan!"

The shutters and shingles of the little pub rattled fiercely in the storm of applause. Old Tom was crying and laughing into his beer while the rest of the men clapped each other on the back and stamped their heavy boots upon the beer-soaked floor. And Alleyne Frogoni smiled in approval.

"Schpeech! Schpeech!" cried out Eifer Cowpers. It was the first time that he had opened his mouth all evening.

"Yes, yes! Let's have a speech," agreed the multitude. By this time the men had scraped forward on their knees to form a semi-circle around the front of the bar. And between the new king and his loyal subjects stood Hurler and Gobble ready to push back any admiring faces that came too close.

"On behalf of the king," shouted Gobble over the hubbub, "I would like to say that . . . "

"I vant to hear der kink schpeak!" Eifer Cowpers snapped. "Iff he can!"

"The king! The king!" chanted the people. "Let's hear the king!"

For the first time that evening, Gobble's face betrayed an uncertain fear. "Let me say a few words in preparation," countered Gobble. "I'm the royal public relations man!"

"It's all right, Gobble," came a sweet and powerful voice from on high. The dwarf whirled around to see Morgan, tall and powerful in the light of his upheld sword. "It's all right. My people will hear me."

And just as Gobble, finger up in objection, was going to say something, Morgan started off on his own. "My people, my people." Hats flew, flags waved and ecstatic voices raised the roof. Another surge of the sword's power entered Morgan. "I'm not one for making speeches . . ." he began after the crowd subsided slightly. Another pub-shaking cry went up, echoing far into the silent forest. A boyish smile broke out upon his young face. "These people . . .," thought Morgan. "They actually like me."

"What will be your First Command, Your Highness?" asked Flesherton Costick.

Opening his mouth to speak, Morgan realized with a start that he did not know. "Do I have to start business right now?" he asked himself. In his hand the sword swelled with potential, but lent him no words. And as his mouth was dry and the barmaid caught his eye, he blurted out. "I'm going to order another Guinness."

In response to this ingenuous hiccup, a mighty roar swelled out of the men, rivalling all the shouting and cheering that had rattled the pubwindows since suppertime. The group around Old Tom went especially wild.

"Oy, the noo king's a rare un!"

"That's my man!"

"Hurray for Morgan!"

Gobble was on the verge of leaping to the forefront and regaining sway when the pub's double doors banged open and in walked a rock-jawed gray-haired man. There he stood, portly and well-dressed in the

centre of a small group of townsmen.

"The Mayor!" someone whispered. "Mayor Wasserman!"

"Begun already?" asked the mayor, his face screwed up. He looked at Gobble. "I was led to believe the meeting started later on. You told me" At this point Hurler took Mayor Wasserman by the arm and led him to the nearest table. The small band of townsmen followed him into the milling crowd. Night air clinging to their clothes, they cooled the air around them.

"What in the world is going on here?" exclaimed the mayor. He shook off Hurler's hand and refused to sit down. "Why is everyone so goggle-eyed and noisy? And who is that ridiculous little boy standing up where nobody has any business? Why, it's Morgan! He's not even old enough to be in a place like this!"

Uncertainty hovered in the air between Morgan and the mayor. The crowd of Black Forestrians, townsmen and barkeeps looked first to one figure, then to the other. Gobble stepped forward. "Mayor Wasserman, it is customary to kneel before the king. You may, however, be excused through ignorance, having arrived late (contrary to my advice) and having missed the revelation of the Heir Apparent to the Throne of Tilantes."

Jumping back beside the bar, the dwarf announced to the wall opposite, "Your Majesty, I beg to take the liberty of infringing on your regal consciousness to introduce to you one of your loyal and powerful, if not tardy, subjects, the Lord Mayor of Tubbersport.

Mayor Wasserman, for your personal edification, this noble figure you behold here before you is none other than King Morgan, Rightful Heir to the Throne, Son of John the Good, in whose Glorious and Loyal Interest we are gathered here this evening."

Mayor Wasserman received this flood with an open mouth. "But that's impossible," he spluttered, "the young prince was kidnapped and never seen again, or so the story goes. I thought he was murdered."

Gobble waded chest-deep through the kneeling crowd towards the mayor. "So did I, Mister Mayor. Or at least that's what I thought until I found this courageous enemy of the dwarfs in a ditch and conveyed him to my hole in the ground to discover the royal lindenring on his finger!"

Morgan held up his ring for all to see. "That's not the way it happened," he thought to himself, "but it was my ring all along."

"And by virtue of clever questioning," continued Gobble, "I discovered that both of his so-called parents had black hair." Gobble extended his palm towards Morgan. "Blond hair! And blue eyes! What do you say to that, Mister Mayor? Not much, perhaps. Lots of people have the same colour hair and eyes as the late queen. But look at that sword! That's royal steel! Real dwarf-work! That is Caliburn, the selfsame sword of King John the Good! Now how can you believe any different?"

The Lord Mayor pondered Gobble's words with care. "That still doesn't mean a thing," the gray-haired man returned. "I refuse to

believe that this vacant-eyed little woodsman is of royal, let alone legitimate blood. If this is another one of your impostures, Mister Gobble the Dwarf . . ."

With bewildered eyes Morgan watched Gobble prying his way through the press towards him. "Well," he mumbled to himself, "if I'm not the prince and not Old John's third son, then who am I? I've got to be somebody!" Then before he could puzzle that one out, questions started to pop up in his face like leaks.

"Your Majesty," coughed Flesherton Costick, "have you ever been sympathetic to the Cause of the Dwarts? It seems to me that upon many Occasions you have demonstrated an Inexorable and Wanton Propensity to Neglect your Catechism!"

"Your Majesty," followed up Abner Funk, who was half-hidden behind Flesherton Costick, "have you ever assisted a Dwarf in Word, Action or Thought?"

"Your Majesty," added Dildo Daggers, protruding from the white-haired man's other side, "and have you ever considered doing so?"

Morgan looked down amazed at all these questions. A worried hubbub was gathering at his feet as he hesitated. The men, one by one, were beginning to rise to their feet.

"Don't stand for that sort of thing," whispered Arthur. "Put them in their proper place. That is King John's Caliburn!"

"Unt vot do you hope to gain," sneered Eifer Cowpers, shaking his gray-meat fist at Morgan, "by pretendink to der throne? Kink Chohn's chewels or Lindenbane's taxes unt lootink?"

Morgan just stood there on the bar, gawking from on high.

Gobble was lost in the milling sea of arms, shoulders and beermugs. "My, oh my!" he said to himself. "My, oh my!"

"All right!" whispered Arthur furiously. "If you won't, I will!"

Morgan heard the clunk and rattle of something heavy being placed between his outspread feet on the glassy top of the bar. Then the sound of steel and flint . . .

BOORAMBO!

A blinding flash, an ear-rending report ripped into his mind.

A monumental shockwave shook the whole of his chubby frame. Thick white smoke and pirouetting sparks coiled up to dazzle his benumbed senses.

By the time a series of thundering echoes had rolled back from the distant Hammer Hills, patches of smoke were beginning to clear. Before him on the floor, Morgan beheld a ragged blanket of men sprawled glassy-eyed and wordless, their heads and shoulders covered with bits of smoking rag and cloth. And above the men, above the dartboard, a gaping hole bordered by splinters had replaced the Skull and Wingbones.

"Arthur!" The thought jumped to Morgan's mind. "Of course, the dwarf-getter!" And looking down, he found Arthur grinning up at him through the acrid smoke.

"How do you like them apples?" chuckled the boy. "Now you've got them where you want them. Even that Gobble fellow and that icky Alleyne Frogoni. Hold up the sword again and tell everybody that you

are going to restore just rule to Tilantes again or whatever you think is the right thing to do. The sword only lends you strength if you believe in what you're fighting for."

"I thought you said your father won it in a poker game!"

Arthur paused and looked up at Morgan for the longest time.

"Never mind how I said I got it! Just believe me. You are the unnamed prince of the song. Don't ask me how I know. Hop to the people now. They're coming around."

Morgan gripped his sword and burped. "I am the king!" he thought. "I must be!" The sword replied by shooting fire and strength into him. And in his other hand Morgan discovered half a bottle of Guinness. Draining the dregs, he tossed it aside and turned to face the silent puddle of questioners. The bottle struck the floor but did not break. It bounced heavily upon the boards and with a ringing roll came to rest against the wall.

"I have been asked four impertinent questions," began Morgan. Everything began to fall into place in his mind. His thoughts were as light as the wind and raced through the night to cull up half-forgotten phrases from the murky past. "Why am I not asked if I am a dwarf myself?" Puffing up his cheeks and swallowing his lower lip, Morgan looked around the quiet room. A breath of fresh air swirled through the ragged hole in the far wall and began clearing the smoke away. "Who will ask the king if he is a dwarf? Who in this room is brave enough to do that?"

Silence froze the air. The wide-eyes on the floor only stared back.

"It seems nobody is brave enough, so I will ask myself. Morgan, Son of John, are you a dwarf?" He wavered back and forth above the listening crowd with a simple smile on his face. Suddenly he clouded over with indignation. "Am I a dwarf?" he shouted. Ripping open his shirtfront, he exposed his bandaged shoulder. "Do you know where I got this?"

The upturned faces on the floor said nothing.

Morgan tore off the white bands of linen to reveal the bloody pad that had covered his wound. "Does that look like dwarf blood?"

"Ooh," squealed Joan, puncturing the silence. "I'm going to faint." Once more the room exploded with hustle and bustle. Abner Funk jostled with Mack St. Orange, vying for the same position. Gobble and Hurler were forced to push back John Clod and Dildo Daggers who tried to crawl up on the bar.

Waving the bloody rag in one hand and the sword in the other, Morgan continued on. "I want now to fulfil the vow which I made to myself yesterday when I was a bleeding refugee hiding under a gorse bush from the dwarfs: to know neither rest nor peace until the November criminals have been overthrown, until on the ruins of the wretched Tilantes of today there should arise once more a Tilantes of power and greatness, of freedom and splendour! I am going to lead you in glorious combat against the unhuman troops of Lindenbane until we have finally overcome that murderer and imposter and driven the dwarf hordes into the sea!"

Screaming, dancing, cheering and back-slapping greeted Morgan when he finally paused for breath. Waves of beer lashed through the air as mug toasted stein and stein toasted mug. It was so unbelievably noisy that all Morgan could do was smile down upon the swirling mass of jubilation.

"My goodness," he exclaimed to himself, "I never realized how easy it was to speak before people. There's nothing to worry about. After awhile, the words just pop out with no effort or thought at all!" He felt strong in his elation, his new discovery.

Behind the crowd of loyalists, Alleyne Frogoni sat smiling in vague amusement. He winked to Gobble and Gobble winked back. Only Mayor Wasserman and Eifer Cowpers seemed disgruntled at the sudden change in wind.

"Who will follow me out the door?" shouted Morgan.

"We will!" came a single roar.

"Who will follow me to Iryntor?"

"We will!"

"Who will follow me to victory?"

"WE WILL!"

And Roger and Joan nearly ran their legs off keeping the thirsty throats cool and moist.

on the march

The midnight bell had long since died away and the chairs, stacked upside-down on tabletops, rested while the smoky and sweaty barmaid was at work sweeping up the remnants of the Royal Awakening. The barkeep, humming a few monotonous bars over and over again, busied himself behind the counter rattling beersteins, drawers and keyrings.

The air was still stale.

The latticed front windows allowed patches of firelight from without to play upon the pancake-wrinkled face of Joan McBone. On the byway out front, a motley crew of torchbearers was gathered together. Joan stopped her sweeping for a moment to peer out at Morgan. His back was to the window; his face, to the crowd. Next to him stood the new lad Arthur, Alleyne Frogoni and McAtom. Gobble was directly between this select group and the larger body of men, waving his arms and pointing here and there. To Joan, all of the orders and instructions amounted to a rising and falling drone. Then a cheer from the men rattled the pub's window-glass. They were stomping and clapping each other on the back. Each man, whether he was holding an oil-rag torch or wrestling his neighbor, sent up a white plume of frosty breath.

"Oh," sighed the barmaid as she turned from the window to half-sit on the nearest table. "My heart's certainly had a wringing tonight!" She sighed again.

"First there were those horrid dwarfs running in, fingering a body all over . . . And then the fine speeches and the shouting. And the new king!" Claspng her hands to her bosom, she lifted her eyes to the ragged hole above the dartboard and sighed a third time.

"What a dear! Such fine white skin, such flawlessly blue eyes and such heart-breakingly blond hair! You don't see much of that in the peasantry." Roger whistled his pointless tune, totally unaware of the disapproving gaze that rested upon his pear-shaped body. "And," continued Joan in her reveries, "his drinking nothing but Guinness!" Her eyes half-closed at the very thought. "I certainly had him pegged for a comer! Wait 'til I tell Mummy! She'll not believe a word."

Roger coughed. Joan lolled her head towards where he was standing in the doorway. "Mith McBone," began the barkeep. "I do hope I'm not interrupting you, but when you leave would you be the kind ath to thlam the door and make thure it'th clothed properly? I would do it mythelf, but Mithter Gobble hath exprethed an interetht in my attending the activitieth of the Thecret Thothiety tonight. He'th going to promote me to Captain of Cannon Foddery. Tho would you make thure to lock up properly?"

And just as Roger was about to take his leave, his eye caught the gaping hole in the far wall. "Oh, and Mith McBone, do you think you could pothibly tack a canvath over that hole that young Arthur blew in the wall? Good night and thleep tight! I'm off to the warth, you know."

"Bye, duck," cooed Miss McBone. "Have fun!"

Roger Mellon, crinkling up his forehead, nearly tripped over his shoelace as he ran out to join the ranks.

Allowing her thoughts to drift back to Morgan's fine skin, particularly that surrounded by his golden linden ring, Joan set to the task of emptying ashtrays and slopping up cold beerpuddles. And she never noticed all the while as the chilly wind played about her ankles.

Roger quietly crept into the obscurity of the group of men.

"And the principle behind this 'dwart-getter', as young Arthur calls it, is Magic Powder," explained Gobble. In his hand, he held up Arthur's pewter pot which was now quite puffy-looking. "Our friend McAtom has kindly invented it to aid us in our mission against the dwarts. Actually, the dwarf-getter is quite a simple machine: when the Magic Powder is ignited by a flame or spark, it explodes into hot gases which propel the desired projectile at high speeds towards the enemy. As you saw earlier on tonight, a doorknob can be driven through the wall of a pub. Using this Magic Powder in larger dwarf-getters, we can command a voice equal to or more that equal to the brute force of the dwarts. Is that not right, Captain McAtom?"

"Aye, rrrright ye arrre," answered McAtom, scuffling one foot in the dirt. One of his knees was hiding behind the other. "And I'm exparrrrimenting wi' a powder that is morre efficient. Anly farty-fi' perrrrcent o' this black stoof is convarrrrted into enerrrrgy, the rrrrest simply goeing oop in smook.

"And what's mair, thanks to the dwarrrt's burrrning of the south end of the island, we have access to grit quantities of charcoal frrroom the linden trrree which is second only to the alderrr for the fine quality o' black powder that it makes."

McAtom's words struck Morgan like a blow on the chest. "You can't say that!" he gasped to himself. "The burning of the lindens isn't fortunate!" But he never said anything. "I suppose," he finally came around to thinking, "that we must win at all costs."

"Why just this merrrrning," continued McAtom, "I made farrrrteen cags o' the stoof and . . ."

But before McAtom could ramble on at length about his black powder, Gobble stepped forward and held up his hand. "At this moment," began the dwarf, "high in the Hammer Hills awaits a battery of dwarf-getters, forged by we Black Forestrian dwarfs for the purpose of crushing the stupid ranks of the dwarts. Let me explain to you how we are gcing to overturn Lindenbane's army:

"First, a brave group of men, you, headed by myself and our illustrious King Morgan, is going to create a diversion at the first dwarf outpost. This will raise the army which will be forced out of bed and will charge ill-prepared into the dark night to chase you, the decoys.

"Second, you will retreat a short distance along Headless Valley. This action will lure the dwarf-troops into a cross-fire of twenty-four of these dwarf-getters. And bear in mind that each one is

ten times the size of this pewter pot. All that remains for you to do is to plug up your ears and watch the fireworks."

Gobble looked around at all the faces to see how they were receiving the news. For the most part, all of the men were cheerfully weaving back and forth belching and snickering. Somehow a large stein of beer had found its way out of the tavern door and was circulating in a circle around Old Tom. Roger's attention was torn between his beer-pot and what Gobble was saying.

Only Marshall C. Bridewell seemed dissatisfied. His black steely eyes were fixed on Gobble and his jaw was busily at work grinding up each word that had been uttered. Gobble ignored him and continued to talk to the treetops on the other side of the road. "After the might of the dwarf army is utterly destroyed, we can enter Iryntor and clean out Lindenbane and the rest of his toadies at our leisure." A modest cheer went up.

"And," added Gobble, "we can help ourselves to the food and drink Lindenbane has stolen from us ever since he entered the castle of Iryntor and began collecting taxes!"

A tumultuous roar of approval seconded this idea.

"Well," smiled Gobble, "I believe that it's time to march!"

"Oy," spoke up Old Tom, coughing into his sleeve. "Oy, 'ate ter interroopt, Gobble, but do ye think ye could spare me a minnoot whilst Oy roon hoom ter fetch the rest o' me medals?"

"We're marching immediately, Private Atkins!" snapped Gobble.

"You've got a whole chestful of them, as it is. All right. Now let's prepare to move out!"

Marshall C. Bridewell stepped forward. "Are we going to be supplied with weapons or are we going to be shot down like turkeys?"

"Sergeant Bridewell," Gobble replied sharply, "like the rest of the men, you will be pleased to know that our loyal friend and supporter, Alleyne Frogoni, has already taken care of that little detail. He has kindly supplied all that is necessary to carry out this mission. And out of his own purse, I might add. Is that not right, Mister Frogoni?"

Alleyne Frogoni, who was standing next to Gobble, smiled. Removing one of his white-gloved hands from behind his back, he raised it on high and snapped his fingers. From behind the first bush on the road trotted a trim little pony pulling a cart laden with bulky instruments protected against the possibility of rain by a canvas. On the cart sat a boy, shivering in a thin jacket.

"Hurler," ordered Gobble, "since Sergeant Bridewell can not wait until the appropriate time to receive his weapon, take Eifer Cowpers and help Bubo unload the cart!"

"Cowpers ain't around here no more," answered Hurler. "He musta slipped off into da woods."

"Hmm. Must have no stomach for fighting. All right, you and Roger Mellon unload."

Morgan looked at the spindly boy pulling the canvas off the cart. It was Bubo Grume, a boy the same age as Morgan. Morgan had seen and talked with him from time to time when Old John had taken him into Tubbersport on Saturday morning shopping trips. "Tsk tsk," he said to

himself as he shook his head. "Those poor townboys never have a chance to grow up to be their own masters. They just grow up into townsmen."

The soldiers-to-be gathered cheerfully around the little cart with "ALLEYNE FROGONI ENTERPRISES" written on its side in thick red letters. Cries of "ooh" and "ah" greeted the first piece of merchandise as Bubo Grume hefted it up onto his knee. It was a big and shiny brass tuba. Neat writing around the rim of the instrument's mouth read: "The Royal Revolutionary Drum and Bugle Brigade -- Courtesy Frogoni's Music Shoppe (Tubbersport)".

Gobble pushed his way through the admiring crowd to the centre of attention. "Now, as I said before," he cut in, "you are to create a diversion to draw the dwarfs out of their stronghold. Since all of you, being in either the Tubbersport Big Brass Band or the Black Forest Music Society, know how to play musical instruments, you will have no objection to marching into battle with these fine pieces of workmanship. Now the tuba goes to Old Tom . . ."

With slight difficulty, Old Tom wedged himself into the tuba's coil and beamed broadly at his good fortune.

" . . . and the bass drum goes to Roger Mellon . . ."

"Doth thith mean," asked Roger, "that I'm Captain of Cannon Foddery?"

"Yes, it does, Captain Mellon. A bass drum can either make or break a brass band."

With a hint of a smile, Roger slipped the drumstraps over his shoulders and jiggled them into the most comfortable position.

"Who wants to play the serpent?" asked Gobble and looked around.

"You, Dornb! You want to play the serpent!"

A small fat-faced smiling townsman held up his hands for the black snaky instrument. Walking back to his place, Hobble Dornb fingered both of the serpent's big brass keys.

"And here's the hunting-horn for John Clod," Gobble continued. And as Clod rushed joyfully forward to claim his horn, Gobble said in a slow, loud voice, "And the snare drum for Mayor Wasserman."

The mayor walked sternly to the front of the cart and held out his hands for the drum. But Gobble moved slightly in front of him. Intercepting the drum on his outspread fingertips, he held it just out of the mayor's reach. "I didn't know," the dwarf cooed with concerned surprise, "that you were interested in following King Morgan into battle?"

"I don't bloody well know how I'm going to stop Lindenbane's dwarts from raiding Tubbersport every second day by myself!" snapped the mayor.

"I do believe you might have a point there, Wasserman," admitted Gobble with a slight smile. The dwarf dropped the drum into the mayor's hands. "Here's your drum. Play it loud and clear!"

Looking him straight in the eye, Mayor Wasserman held his peace. Turning his back on Gobble, he stomped back to the rear.

"Step along, everyone," yelled Gobble. "Step along. We've a lot to do tonight!" He turned to see what Bubo had hauled out of the bottom of the Frogoni delivery cart. "Um, here's a trumpet for Mack

St. Orange . . . and a violin for Flesherton Costick . . . A violin? In a marching band?" Gobble looked at Bubo who in turn looked at Alleyne Frogoni.

Alleyne Frogoni smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well," said Gobble, "violins it is! What? Some more? Ahum, Funk, Daggers and you, Bridewell, can all play second violin! Now that takes care of that. "Um, here's a piccolo. Too bad Eifer Compers isn't here . . ."

"I can play the piccolo," spoke up Arthur. "Give it here."

The dwarf unloaded the tiny instrument on Arthur and turned back to the cart to see how many instruments were left. But a huge hand on his shoulder spun him about and brought him face to face with Marshall C. Bridewell. "I have to walk into the wrath of an army of horse-dwarts with this?" growled the big black-haired man. Gobble was intent on avoiding a collision of his nose with the violin that was being shaken under it.

"Well, if you really have any objections," pouted Gobble, "you can play first violin . . ." And he tried to wrest himself from the large man's iron grip. "If you would only care to let me go, I'll begin distribution of the woodwinds to the townsfolk."

"I'm going to bust this objection over your head, if I don't get a sword! I didn't come to play second-fiddle in no marching band!"

"All right! All right!" soothed Gobble. "There's swords. Bubo, give Bridewell a Number Three."

"Number One!" corrected Marshall. "A Number One Heavy!"

"All right!" grumbled Gobble. "A Number One! I don't see what difference it makes anyways."

Bubo rummaged in the bottom of the cart until he came up with a Number One. Letting Gobble bounce back to earth, Marshall took up the sword in one hand, tried it for weight and then slapped its blade into his palm. "It'll do," he nodded and stalked away.

"I'm glad," replied Gobble, straightening his lapels. He smouldered after the large black back for a minute or two before he returned to his task of supervising the distribution. "Now here's a sackbut. Who can play it?"

A tall skinny townsman smiled uncertainly and held up his hand. "Step along, Shingleton," barked Gobble, "we haven't got all night!" The corners of Elmer Shingleton's mouth twitched up and down in apology as he stepped forward to receive the shiny slide instrument.

"Who hasn't got an instrument now?" asked the dwarf and looked over the jumble of men.

And so went the military preparations until the Royal Revolutionary Drum and Bugle Brigade was deemed, in Gobble's eyes, ready for battle.

"Readddddy, March!" shouted Gobble. "Hup two, hup two."

Boom! Boom! Boom! Roger shook the very earth with his bass drum. Ratatatat! Ratatatat! Mayor Wasserman joined in on the snare, and John Clod sent up a heartening flare of trumpet. TataTA! Old

Tom sent mighty OOMPAHS heavensward and the band was off, marching in step with a brassy tune.

The lead party headed by Gobble consisted of McAtom, Marshall, Arthur and Morgan. These five led the marching band north on the byway and waved to Alleyne Frogoni who sat in the cart behind Bubo Grume.

Smiling sweetly, Alleyne Frogoni waved back.

Off into the darkness of the Black Forest marched the small band. Those that could sing extolled King John's virtues in the "Natural Anther" and those that played no instruments proudly carried torches to light the way.

King John of Iryntor
Peaceful but strong in war
Shines like the dawn.
He's not vainglorious
Puff or uproarious
Simply adorous
Our simple John.

Oh John our King arise
Scatter our enemies
And make them fall.
Confound their politics
Frustrate their knavish tricks
On thee our hopes we fix
Oh save us all.

Fair-haired but brown of eye
Thy smile is like the sky.
Long may thee reign.
Feed us and tell us jokes
Amuse and jolly folks
Step in and take our yokes
And ease our pain.

Our loved Tilantes bless
 With peace and happiness
 From shore to shore
 And let our Island be
 Proud, Loy'l and Taxes-free
 True to herself and me
 For ever more.

"Oy, let's do 'er oop for Morgan!" shouted a red-faced Old Tom,

"Yes, yes," everyone agreed.

Old Tom cleared his throat and then began to bellow out a new verse. The others, humming and singing, stumbled after as best they could.

Morgan of Souther Shore
 Peaceful but strong in war
 Just like his dad,
 He's not vainglorious
 Puff or uproarious
 Simply adorious
 Our simple lad.

Morgan liked this verse above all the others, even though he wondered at some of the larger words. He puffed out his chest all the further and continued on into the night.

"Oy, it's joost loike owld toimes again," announced Old Tom, who had just taken another swig from a bottle that was finding its way from lip to lip. "Oy can feel it in me bownes!"

"Hey, I am going to keel a tousand dwarts!" declared John Clod. His eyes were shining in the torchlight. "Hebbe two tousand!"

"It does a Body good to get out in the Fresh Air," commented Flesherton Costick. "And the Soul benefits, of course, as well!" Funk and Daggers nodded vigorously.

And Morgan was excited by the strong beat of the bass drum, the brave blare of the brass and the fearsome romance of the fire-flicker on all the happy faces. The torches in the wind above were roaring and flapping raggedly like flags.

"What a valiant army!" Morgan smiled to himself. "And I'm in charge. I wouldn't trade places with anyone in the world right now!" And on either side of him marched Arthur and Marshall C. Bridewell. The skinny boy skipped merrily along while the big bear of a man kept his thoughts to himself.

the dwarf-storm at headless valley

The small, but valiant army of musicians was fast approaching dwarf territory. From down the pine-lined Headless Valley came the roar of the raging, foaming Upas River as it ripped through the jagged confines of Gorgeous Gorge. And in the air there hung a bitter scent, the spray that over the ages had covered the rocks about with a whitish tinge.

"Company halt!" bellowed Gobble. He turned around to face the men. "I'm going on ahead to see that everything is ready. Hurler, McAtom, you two stick around to keep up the spirit of the men and see to it that nobody drifts off and gets lost. And remember, you men: keep it down! Just across Turkey's Neck Bridge is the first dwarf outpost." Then he quietly said to Morgan, "Well, King Morgan, do you want to come with me and survey the battleground?"

"Um, yes," nodded Morgan, fingering the sword in his belt.

"The battleground."

"I'm coming too," piped up Arthur.

Gobble looked at him and muttered something under his breath.

So Morgan and Arthur walked along, the dwarf silent between them.

After a brisk walk, Gobble stopped. "Well," he asked, waving to the hillsides, "How do you like our preparations?"

"Very nice . . .," said Morgan, "but I can't see a thing!"

Pines and boulders stared down on the threesome. "Exactly," smiled Gobble. "You're not supposed to. I've taken extreme care with this little plan. Let's take a bit of a jaunt up this hill and see what we can see upon closer observation."

Gobble struck off with Morgan and Arthur close on his heels. But somehow the dwarf melted quietly into the roadside darkness and was lost to sight. The two boys jumped over a collection of logs, boulders and sharp small rocks and stopped in the inky shadow of a pine tree. Listening, they heard Gobble scuffling along up ahead. Then off to the right, there came the crash and splinter of a branch being stepped on. Two yellow-green eyes blinked out of the black.

"I thought Gobble was ahead of us," whispered Arthur.

"So did I," gulped Morgan. "Perhaps that's a cairngorm-muncher!"

"A what?"

"Or a ballyox . . ."

"Maybe we had better call him. Gobble! Gobble!"

"Gobble! Gobble!"

The eyes blinked out and crashed away into the night.

"Hurry up and keep it down!" came a voice from in front. "You sound like a bunch of turkeys."

The boys hastily trotted along in that direction. Not far ahead they found Gobble standing between two bushes. To the great surprise of Morgan and Arthur, the two bushes rustled, moved and then talked. With mouths agape, the two boys peered into the leafy branches to discover that the bushes were not bushes at all, but two dwarfs disguised as such.

"This is King Morgan," Gobble announced quietly to his two friends. The dwarfs nodded. "And these are our two Artillery Captains, Morgan. Captains Nespul and Blung. They're in charge of our dwarf-getter embankment.

"Hello," said Morgan.

"Hi! I'm Arthur," said Arthur.

The dwarfs looked blankly at the two boys.

"Nespul and Blung, spread the word." The two dwarf shrubs silently vanished into the darkness on either side. "Now, I suppose you two would like to see a real dwarf-getter. Come on with me."

They walked along the slant of the hill until Gobble grabbed Morgan by the jacket. "Hold it, don't step there!" The dwarf reached down into the leaves and pine needles. "Cover your lights, Number Nine!" he cried out. And with that he pulled up the hillside, leaves and all, to reveal a black hole in the ground.

Morgan was speechless, but Arthur said, "Oh, that's just a canvas with dirt and leaves glued on!"

"Right you are," smiled Gobble. "Now how do you like a real dwarf-getter?"

After Morgan's eyes adjusted to the dark, the murky depths of the hole gradually formed into a pattern. Inside the long trench was a mammoth gray carrot, or so it seemed to Morgan, and three more dwarfs almost invisible to the unalerted eye. One dwarf was holding a long stick topped with a fuzzy ball. Another dwarf was idling by on one of

many small wooden kegs that lined one wall of the trench. And the third was busily at work oiling a complex set of gears and levers at the fatter end of the giant carrot.

Gobble jumped down into the pit beside it. "This," he said proudly, "is a dwarf-getter. Come on down here and I'll show you around." So Morgan and Arthur jumped down after him. Patting the side of the giant carrot, Gobble said, "Feel this. That's real dwarf-work. Nobody but nobody on this island can turn out a masterpiece like this."

Morgan put out his hand and touched a smooth surface. It was cold, solid and very uncarrotlike. "Come here and look down the sights," said Gobble. Morgan went around to the rear and peeped over a round bulge of metal. Through two circlets of wire, criss-crossed with hair-like strands, he spied a section of road.

"Now turn this," said Gobble, indicating a wheel with a handle on it. Doing as he was told, Morgan noticed that the whole trunk of the dwarf-getter slowly pivotted at its centre and its aim swept down the road. An opposite turn of the wheel brought it to bear up the road. The brass of Old Tom's tuba glinted in the cross-hairs.

By this time Gobble had wandered around to the front-end. He beckoned to Morgan. "How would you like one of these coming at you so fast that you couldn't see it?" The dwarf was holding an iron ball the size of his head. He plopped it into Morgan's hands.

"Oof," grunted Morgan. "This is heavier than it looks."

Patting the front of the dwarf-getter, Gobble smiled. "It goes in here, after one of those kegs of Magic Powder. And then the whole thing is tamped into place with this instrument here." Gobble pointed to the rod in the first dwarf's hand. "And that fellow at the back aims the dwarf-getter and fires it by pulling back that flint-lever there." Morgan looked where Gobble was pointing and saw a mass of levers and bumps.

"Wow," marvelled Arthur. "This is better than I ever expected. You could lob one of those balls for miles!"

"We intend to. Right after we clean up the horsedwarts. They're our most immediate problem. After they're out of the way, we can wheel these machines around and blow holes in the castle."

"Wow," said Arthur.

"Wow is right," continued Gobble. "And take a look at one of our flying bombs." He went to the rear of the trench and took down a small length of stovepipe from a rack. Handing it to Morgan, he said, "This little gem is full of Magic Powder too, and when you light the fuse it flies up in the air. Then the flash bomb at the tip explodes and you can see for miles. It'll throw those dwarts for a loop. They've never seen anything like this before."

"Neat," smiled Arthur, who had taken the flying bomb from Morgan and was fondling it in his arms.

"It's just about time to attack now," said Gobble, replacing the missile, "so let's get back to the men and get them properly tuned up."

So they all crawled out of the trench one after the other.

"Carry on," shouted Gobble into the hole before he covered it over again.

"Don't shoot until you see the greens of their eyes!" The three returned through the pines to the road and the awaiting brass band.

"And now," said Gobble as he tapped on the rim of Old Tom's tuba, "we'll go over the plans for the last time: First, begin marching in time to the drum-beat; second, when I give the signal, break into "Adieu Lindenbane" which is on page 13 of your music books; and third, when the order to retreat is given, turn smartly about and keep on playing. Walk quickly, but don't run, until you return to this very spot. I'll mark it with this." Gobble tied a white handkerchief to the top of a mulberry bush at the side of the road. "You'll be safe here. All that will be left for you to do is to watch the fireworks and enjoy yourselves. Just leave the rest to the dwarfs."

Just then, a dwarf ran out of the wood and handed Gobble a cross-bow, its string cocked and a bolt in place. Gobble nodded. The dwarf saluted and ran back from where he came. "All right. We're ready to move. Here's to victory! Forrrrrrrard MARCH! Hup two, hup two!"

Everyone from Gobble right back to Hurler, who was bringing up the rear and wielding his torch like a club, fell into step with Roger's BOOM BOOM BOOM. "On three," shouted Gobble, "One, two, three!" As it was the first time that the musicians in the band had ever seen the song, they played a trifle clumsily. But after the first few verses, they did

not even need to look into Gobble's music books to know the tune.

Tilantes fair, that high and mighty Madam,
Is trembling bare, before the Swords of Dwartdom,
So Freedom Fighters plight to wave your Banners bright,
Blow on Trombones and carry on the Fight.
So Freedom Fighters plight to wave your Banners bright,
Blow on Trombones and carry on the Fight.

Oh let us rise, my Men, my Brave and Steadfast;
Small Price to pay to march against the dread Blast.
So follow, follow me to valiant Victory,
My Motherland, I think, is calling me.
So follow, follow me to valiant Victory,
My Motherland, I think, is calling me.

Oh let us march with Right and Broken Bottles
To Iryntor, and bite the Hand that throttles
Oh adieu Lindenbane, you've tasted your last Toad,
Hop on your Horse, and Baby, hit the Road!
Oh adieu Lindenbane, you've tasted your last Toad,
Hop on your Horse, and Baby, hit the Road!

With pride and resolution glowing on their faces, the members of the band marched around the roadbend to enter the darkness of Headless Valley. Halfway through the third verse, the little army emerged at the brink of Gorgeous Gorge, just within sight of the first dwarf outpost on the other side of a hump-backed bridge. Their brassy challenge rang throughout the hollow formed by the meeting of the three valleys.

Morgan saw two dwarfs, who had been lazing in their guard booth, suddenly jump up and run to their stations: one took his place beside a large metal disk suspended by heavy-link chain from the rafters of the guardshack; and the other drew his sword to take up the guard at the foot of the bridge.

"Company HALT!" commanded Gobble. "Prepare to taste defeat, you dodo dwarfs!" he bellowed across the gorge. The band was still playing and singing in the background. "We've come to drive every last one of your stinking carcasses into the rising tide!"

The first dwarf picked up a sledge hammer and drove its head against the gong's curved surface. A swelling reverberation rang up all three valleys and back down again. The other guard planted his feet firmly in the centre of the path at the dwarf-side of the humpbacked bridge. His sword did not flash, but rather loomed darkly in his fist behind his heavy iron shield. The dwarf was ready to repel invaders. Again the gong filled the sky with alarm.

Morgan looked into Gobble's face. It was unusually calm and a hint of a smile twisted up the corner of his mouth. Raising the crossbow up to his shoulder, the dwarf stopped breathing and gently squeezed the trigger. A twang and a whistle drove the dwarf-bolt out of the crossbow, across the roaring and fuming gorge and into the eye of the dwarf who was guarding the bridge. The stricken dwarf stood like a dazed man for the longest time and, still clutching his sword and shield, toppled slowly over backwards onto his head as his thick legs buckled at the knees.

A loud cheer went up. Another gong and another tolled out. The bass drum's booms mocked each other of the dwarf's desperate alarms and the military music trumpeted triumph to the skies.

Arthur crowded closer to Morgan and the sword Caliburn. Morgan watched Gobble who stood legs apart, surveying the situation. Gobble then turned to face him. "Well, King Morgan," he said, "I'm going to trot back to the rest of the dwarfs and prepare to give the signal to fire. I think that it's best if I get out of sight. If the dwarfs see me, they might think there's something up. You see, we dwarfs have a reputation for being sneaky amongst the dwarfs. But that's because the dwarfs are so stupid that they think feeling soup with your finger before gulping it down is a master effort in brain-work!"

"You're not leaving?" asked Morgan incredulously. "You can't leave now! The dwarfs are coming!"

"I'm sorry, but I must. I have the important task of giving the signal to fire, if you remember correctly. Besides, it's not my job leading the royal troops into battle. Is it, King Morgan?" Gobble's mouth twisted a little as he watched Morgan's reaction.

Morgan said nothing.

"Don't tell me the king is getting chicken?" asked Gobble with surprise.

"No, I'm not!" retorted Morgan.

"That's good!" smiled Gobble as he handed the sprung crossbow to Arthur. "Nobody likes a chicken. Now remember to give the command to retreat when you see the horsedwarfs piling out of that gap opposite. Keep a stiff upper lip. Ta ta! Come on, McAtom." And with a tip of his hat, Gobble moved off, McAtom at his side.

Looking after their hurrying backs, Morgan felt his strength waning. The sword in his hand hung inert at his side and quivered ever so slightly. Morgan noticed, turning his head unhappily back to the battlefront, that Arthur was busily at work cranking the wire back on the crossbow. When it snapped back over the trigger-release, Arthur pulled the piccolo from his pocket and clicked it into the smooth firing channel.

And the band played merrily on. The violins squeaked against the deep blast of the tuba. The trumpets shot volley after volley across the gorge and echo after echo came bleating back. The drums too sent up an admirable bump and clatter.

Morgan wondered if Old Tom and John Clod, Flesherton Costick, Funk and Daggers could possibly know that this was not just another band practice. But the music only blared on as before. And he wondered if the dwarfs were ever going to respond to the alarm. They were taking such a long time.

Eyes fixed upon the black breach across the gorge, he wondered if he would be able to muster up enough volume in his cracked and dry throat to issue the order to retreat.

And to his complete horror and amazement, the gap opposite stirred with a flash and a shadow. Then it filled with the clatter of iron hoofbeats and the all-too-solid flesh of horse and dwarf. Legs and lungs frozen, Morgan boiled in his own cold sweat.

"What am I doing?" he gasped aloud. "Here I am leading a brass band against a horde of horsedwarts! And each one of them is enough for all of us, arms or no arms!"

Then from out of nowhere, Marshall C. Bridewell moved to the forefront brandishing his Number One in his fist. "Get back!" he cried over his shoulder as he stepped up to a narrowing of the path. A rocky wall towered to his left; and a smoking gorge, a foot's step away to his right, plunged off into nowhere. "Get back, you slouches! Retreat, or whatever the word is, but get back!"

Pivoting smartly about on their heels, the musicians began to march back into the valley in step with Roger's BOOM BOOM BOOM. Headless Valley stretched out before them like an endless corridor.

"Move, you stupid assholes!" screamed Marshall at the top of his lungs. His face was beet-red; his eyes, wild and full of tears. "And you kids get out of here, too!"

Arthur gripped Morgan's sleeve and tried to pull the chalky-faced little boy away from where he was rooted. "Let's go," he urged. "You're supposed to lead the retreat." A dwarf-bolt exploded a section of gray rock beside Morgan's face. Rock splinters stung his cheeks and brought a painful wash of tears to his eyes.

"Run like crazy, kids!" shouted the man. "Get out of sight." Morgan allowed himself to be led away by the sleeve. And Marshall C. Bridewell, satisfied at that, turned his back on his king for the first and last time. He blinked away the sweat in his eyes and concentrated

on the horsedwart that was now jumping over the lifeless body of the guard at the dwarf-side of the gorge.

Callop! Callop! Callop!

And the first dwarf-warrior of many was over the bridge.

Morgan and Arthur ran for their lives, and in no time at all, they caught up to the marching band. It was trumpeting loudly as it wound its way none too quickly through the shadowy curves of Headless Valley.

And the bright moon in the black-and-purple sky above travelled imperceptibly along on her way.

The first dwarhorse reared up to crush Marshall under its hooves, but he was quicker. He sidestepped, drove his sword into the horse's heart. Gripping the haft in both hands, he strained upwards. His face flushed crimson-black. A mighty shove and both horse and master toppled screaming over the brink, down into the poisonous roil of smoke. And before Marshall could hear the falling flesh and armour tear and grate on the ragged rock, the second dwarhorse thundered down upon him.

The warhorse hugged the wall, forcing him out on the brink. In both hands, he raised his sword above his head to bring it whistling down upon the face of the second horsedwart. But the blow fell short, the sword freezing in the heart of the dwarf's uplifted shield. Marshall tugged at his weapon, but it would not give. So with a mighty

wrench, he ripped both it and the cloven shield from the dwarf's thick fingers. Bashing and crashing this new weapon against head, shoulders and arms, he forced the dwarf back until he saw it slump inert against the wall. And as its steed moved forward, the dwarf tumbled over backwards. Away down the path, kicking up sparks and gravel, galloped the empty horse.

Marshall fell back upon the wall and gasped. Blood was streaming over his eyes from a slash across his forehead and his tricorner hat was gone, revealing a crown of skin through his otherwise thick black head of hair.

And before he was ready, the hoof of a third dwarhorse crashed down upon the shield and sundered it from his Number One. Down it smashed upon his unarmoured kneecap and up lanced the sword into the horse's riverside eye. With a high-pitched whinny, the half-blinded horse bucked off its rider and, in short order, bounded off after into its private night.

Marshall, groaning on the cold, rocky trail with a splintered kneecap, seized up the riven shield, the only thing close, and hefted it up to protect his head. Then down crashed an iron thunderstorm of hooves.

Oh let us march with Right and Broken Bottles
 To Iryntor, and bite the Hand that throttles.
 Oh adieu Lindenbane, you've tasted your last Toad,
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 Oh adieu Lindenbane, you've tasted your last Toad,
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The band was enjoying its first perfect rendition of "Adieu Lindenbane" when Headless Valley rattled awake with horseshoes biting into the white paving stones. Like a couple of worried sheepdogs, Arthur and Morgan ran around the musicians urging them to step up their tempo. But they were deaf to all but the beat of the big bass drum.

Blang!

Old Tom's mouthpiece jumped out of his mouth. To his great surprise, he stared at a dwarf-bolt lodged in the brassy throat of his tuba. "Oy, me toober! She's stoven in! She won't bloo!"

The sackbut's resonant bloop razzmatazzed to a bleep and Elmer Shingleton, Townsman, dropped in his tracks. Hobble Dornb, on serpent, likewise sunk to the cobblestones, a red-hot bolt buried in his spine. But the band marched on.

"Raughghah!" snarled the horsedwarts as they poured into the valley. They bore down, hooting and shooting, upon the Royal Revolutionary Drum and Bugle Brigade. "Raugh, Squarsh, khill!"

And to Roger Mellon's consternation, the ball on the end of his drumstick vanished with a whistle. Only a splinter remained to mark the spot. The BOOM BOOM BOOM having stopped, chaos descended upon the marching band. Flashes and sparks flew upwards as musical instruments and torches hit the ditch.

"To the mulberry bush!"

"Halp!"

"Oh, oh, oh!"

In his haste, Abner Funk bumped into Old Tom who was waddling as fast as he could along the road. This jostle spun the old fellow around to collide with Dildo Daggers, the next in line. Wheeling around the other way, Old Tom caught Mack St. Orange full in the stomach with his tuba, but that only served to knock himself over backwards. The old soldier, medals jingling, wriggled like a land crab to right himself, but his tuba, wrapped around his arms and legs, frustrated his every effort. "Oy," he cried out. "Holp an owld gaffer! Holp! Holp!"

But no one seemed to notice him in the blackness of the torchless night. Roger, his bass drum jouncing up and down under his nose, galloped right by Old Tom. Mayor Wasserman, too, was more interested in following after Flesherton Costick's stiff-legged gait.

"Onwards to Glorious Retreat!" bellowed out Flesherton Costick. "He who fights and runs Away may live to fight Another Day; but he who's in the Battle Slain will never live to fight Again!" And he dashed off, like the others, towards the refuge of the white handkerchief.

John Clod alone seemed unconcerned with the dwarfs. Tooting "Adieu Lindenbane" louder than ever, he marched on.

A few paces behind, three figures and a torch were fleeing before the dwarf vanguard. "Hey," shouted Morgan and Arthur. "It's Old Tom!" Hurler threw down his torch to help the old man.

"Here," shouted Hurler into Old Tom's fuzzy ear, we gotta get dat tuba offa your head. You can't run no good like dat!" Old Tom replied by scrambling away on hands and knees, and swatting at Hurler's helping hands.

Zog!

A red mark crept outward from a dwarf-bolt stubbily jutting from the centre of Hurler's white trousers. Pitching sideways, the bald bouncer collapsed upon the pavement, half-sitting and half-lying. His face was twisted, garishly illuminated by the guttering torch in front of him. "I'll just rest here a minnit . . .," he gritted through his teeth. And he said no more.

"Hurler!" screamed Morgan, clapping his hands to his head.

"Hurler! Get up!" But the huge hulk of Henry Hurler could only gasp and stare at the little king whom he had sworn to protect to his dying breath. He could scarcely raise his hand as warning. Turning, Morgan beheld the grit-teeth fury of a dwarf almost on top of him, its broadsword drawn back like a polo mallet. Expecting oblivion to wash over him in the next instant, Morgan stood stockstill and watched its approach with saucer eyes.

Zap!

A piccolo seemed to pop halfway out of the dwarf's windpipe. Arthur! The crossbow! Morgan's would-be attacker let the sword slip gently from his hand and with a soft fluting, galloped by only to pitch off and crash rolling to the ground. His sword skittered and clattered along the cobblestones and with a bounce, came to stab upright in the grassy bank of the ditch.

"Let's get out of here!" hollered Arthur.

"But there's Hurler . . .," objected Morgan, pointing at their wounded friend. Hurler waved them away.

"Let's go!" the other boy repeated and dashed off. So Morgan ran off after Arthur to leave the bouncer wobbling all alone at the side of the road. Ahead of the two boys, Old Tom was scrambling furiously on all fours, his tuba still tightly wedged around his massive middle. And beyond the white handkerchief, a ragged crowd of musicians was egging them on.

Beneath Morgan's running feet, the ground began to shake. He turned to see a monstrous number of horsedwards sweeping down upon him. They were packed so tightly that they formed a massive wave of flesh and armour surging down the valley like a flash flood.

Old Tom and Arthur reached the magic white handkerchief at the same time and rushed beyond it. Breathing heavily and stumbling, Morgan struggled onward. But the harder he strained, the more his flabby body seemed to work against him.

"Hurry up, Morgan! They're right behind you!"

"Just a bit more!"

"Oh no!"

"He's fallen!"

From the corner of his eye, Morgan saw an indistinct black bundle charge out of the ditch to clatter down the road towards him. It leapt over his exhausted and frightened body. "eeYAUGH!" The odd noise heartened Morgan. He rolled over onto his back to see his old mule hurl herself against the chest of the lead dwarthorse.

"Mary!" shouted Morgan. "You're all right!"

"Gaurm fuzzle gasket!" snarled the dwarf. He wheeled around to get a clear swipe at whatever it was that was biting and kicking his mount. But as the dwarthorse reared up and whirled about, Mary danced after her, keeping just out of range of the cruel iron blade.

Morgan staggered to his feet. He bent over and picked up his fallen sword. "You leave Mary alone!" he shouted and began hacking at his enemy's leg. Caliburn flashed in the moonlight and bit deeply in many places. Hot blood spurted everywhere, but as soon as the red wash touched the sword's blue-white surface, it vanished into smoke.

"Aurghghg!" roared out the dwarf. And with a hateful grimace, he leaned down and raised his sword to take a swipe at Morgan. But in the next instant, the dwarthorse reared up with a squeal of pain to dump him head over heels on the road. Mary's teeth were buried deep in the dwarthorses's underbelly. But that horse, tearing herself free, dived into the ditch and dragged her master yowling behind her, his foot still twisted in the stirrup.

Throwing one leg over her back and his good arm around her neck, Morgan embraced the mule. "Let's go, Mary! Let's get out of here!" With six snarling horsedwarts on her tail, Mary half-carried and half-dragged her boy past the white handkerchief.

"Hurray! Hurray!" cheered the musicians.

"Now for the fireworks!"

But their cheers soon twisted into screams as the dwarf troops thundered down upon them.

"Shoot! Shoot!" shouted Flesherton Costick.

"Why don't they open up?" screamed Mayor Wasserman.

"Oh, holpholp holp!"

The valley walls were black shadows against the twinkle of the night sky. Moonlight silvered the pineboughs and rounded the roadside rocks with softness. Then the valley exploded into white lightning and earthshakes of thunder.

KOORASH!

The first of the lead dwarfs disintegrated into bloody mush before Morgan's eyes. Dwarf blood splattered high into the air and came sprinkling down like gentle rain.

CHOW! CHOW! CHOW!

The head and helmet of the second warrior disappeared into thin air like the ball on Roger Mellon's drumstick, but the headless body rode blindly on, scattering the amazed musicians like ten-pins.

BAZOOM! RABOOP!

Flashes of liquid flame lashed out of the pine-tree hillside. The valley burst open with a glare brighter than day. A lapse of blackness tumbled back in and then the next volley split the night.

BUMBLE! BOOM! RUMBLE! POO!

Underfoot, the road heaved at each blast. Heavy plumes of dirt and rubble erupted near, then far and right and left. Cobblestones, dust and branches showered steadily down. Then a pine-tree exploded half-way up. Its top snapped off and the tree itself toppled down upon the

backs of the ambushed horsedwarts. From nowhere, a piece of wood rose spinning and was lost to sight.

Morgan glimpsed a patch of pink skin between the kicking legs and writhing bodies of dwarts and horses. It was Hurler propped up at the side of the road, waiting out his minute. Morgan was about to point him out to nobody in particular, but a ring of fire swallowed up the sight. Clouds of thick and foul-smelling smoke began to fill up the valley.

All of a sudden the road exploded in Morgan's face. He was thrown over backwards by the shockwave.

"They can't see where they're shooting in the smoke!"

"Back! Back! Get back!"

"Kaff! Koff!"

Unable to see or breathe, Morgan started to crawl away up the hill. Hacking and snorting, Mary trotted along at his side. "Away, away," thought Morgan over and over. "Got to get away!" The cries of dwarts and men passed unnoticed in the valley of death while above, the sky was aflame with an endless stream of violently bright flashes of magnesium.

Finally around the next bend of the road, the smoke was thin enough to see and breathe. Morgan and Mary stumbled out of the valley into the presence of Arthur, Mayor Wasserman, Flesherton Costick, Roger Mellon and John Clod.

"Hurray for King Morgan!" shouted Flesherton Costick. "A Natural King and Victor!"

"Boy oh boy wow!" laughed Arthur, jumping up and down and clapping his hands.

"Deed we evair show zem, hey?" chortled a merry John Clod.

"We thure did show them crapped dwarth!"

Morgan was amazed to see everyone in such gay spirits. What he had just lived through was terrible! "Wasn't it so for them too?" he wondered. "And where are the rest of the men? Old Tom, Funk, Daggers and . . ." He blinked. "Where is everybody?" he gasped out loud.

"Well, for One," coughed Flesherton Costick, "that Bridewell fellow broke from our Ranks and for all I know, is Lost! It is a Pity, but he did leave the Band."

Before Morgan could say a thing, John Clod butted in. "Oh, zose cheeken Abner Funks an' Deeldo Daggaires, zey ran off down ze road!" He laughed and wagged his finger at Flesherton Costick.

"And so did your Precious Mack St. Orange!" retorted the white-haired man.

"This is my mule," sighed Morgan and plumped down onto a roadside rock. "Mary is her name . . ."

And the crash and the flash of the dwarf-storm thundered on.

the turning of the tide

The fresh air felt good in Morgan's lungs. He sat on his rock with Mary at his side and just breathed.

The firing and the bombing had tapered off to the odd blast or flash which rumbled or sizzled into an otherwise peaceful mountain night. Silently the shadows crept back into Headless Valley. But a bubble of light hovered over the standing circle at Morgan's feet. Arthur and Mayor Wasserman each held a swelling firebrand before them.

"Well," said Arthur, clearing his throat to crack the crystal of the night. "It sounds just about over."

"I suppose," followed up Flesherton Costick, "we are Duty Bound to look into the Situation as it may stand in the Valley."

"Let's, let's," urged Arthur, jumping up and down.

"Do you think it'th thafe quite yet?" asked Roger, swallowing. His bowtie twitched a quarter-turn. "I mean really thafe?"

"Oh yes! Dreadfully safe! Let's go, let's go!"

"What, King Morgan," asked Mayor Wasserman, "do you say?"

Morgan shifted around under the steady gaze of the mayor.

"Um . . . that sounds like a good idea, I suppose. Ah yes . . ." The mule at Morgan's side raised a graying eyebrow and nudged him in the ribs. "That's a good girl, Mary. Let's go," he mumbled as he clambered to his feet. "Come on."

Morgan's knees were a bit stiff, a bit squeaky, and his shoulder wound was tickling him ever so slightly. But other than that he felt

none the worse for wear. "All right, everybody," he announced, joining the circle. "I guess we're off. Come on, Mary. You don't want to be left behind."

Mary, stiff-legged in the middle of the road, watched after the backs of the returning musicians. Then, with what seemed a sigh, she took up trotting dutifully after her Morgan.

Around the bend in the road the smoke, still hanging thinly in the air, was like summer fog: trees close at hand were slightly misted over, but those just a step beyond were lost completely. Stripped of leaves, birch branches loomed out of the white-nothing like weird arms and crooked fingers with blackened joints.

The small group of men moved on down into Headless Valley with the hazy clouds closing together behind. Looking back, Morgan saw only a few scattered faces. Holding his breath, he heard bootheels on cobblestones over the flutter of oil-rag torches. And in the distance, a dog howled at the clear-sky moon above Tubbersport. The night chill found out the base of Morgan's back where his shirt-tail stuck out and sent a shiver up his spine, speckling his arms and legs with goose-pimples.

"What's that up ahead?" asked Arthur in a low voice.

"What?" whispered Mayor Wasserman. Morgan stopped and the company stopped with him.

"There. In the ditch. That humpy thing."

"Oh, yes. I couldn't say. I don't know."

Slowly, the band of men approached on tiptoe. The clump of darkness shifted from side to side in the ditch. All of a sudden it let out a fearsome OOMPAH and flashed a brassy golden in the nearing firelight.

"A cairngorm-muncher!" gasped Morgan to himself. An icy claw gripped his intestines. "It has finally shown! We'll all be munched up like cairngorms!"

Arthur, who was huddled close, let out a yell: "Wow, it's Old Tom!"

"Ho ho ho!" laughed John Clod. "Wat you doing down zere in ze deetch?"

Old Tom looked up surprised and smiled. "Oy, it's you lot! Ye'll be glad to knoo that Oy've put me toober roight wi' the world again. She joost wanted a wee bit o' banging." Struggling to his feet, the tuba still coiled about him, Old Tom gave a whiskery laugh and pointed down the road towards the scene of the battle. "Owld Gobble put it to 'em strite, 'e did. Thur's nary a whoostle froom the dwarts now!"

John Clod and Flesherton Costick laughed. Then each, noticing the other, frowned and their chuckles died away. A wave of smoke washed over them, swallowing up their every sound. After Old Tom crawled out of the ditch to join them once again, the men continued on into Headless Valley. As they moved, a small area of the road opened up before them; and behind, unnoticed, a small area clouded over. Presently, they began to descend the little hill that led down into the valley proper.

"The smoke's getting thicker," observed Mayor Wasserman.

"And damper," added Arthur.

"The Smoke of a man's Own house," resolved Flesherton Costick, "is Better than the Fire of Another's."

Morgan sniffed the air. "I think it's fog," he said, "from the gorge."

"Probably, probably!" coughed the white-haired old man. "Scratch a pear and find a prickle!"

"Hey, wat eez zat on ze road?" shouted John Clod. A hulk of something loomed out of the hanging smoke and rolling fog. Slowly the men advanced.

"Oy, it's a bleedin' dwarf'orse!"

One by one, the men came to stop at the dead mare. It was lying on its back, its feet limply jutting towards the sky, as if frozen in the middle of a mid-summer's roll in a grassy pasture and whisked far away over the hills to the dead of a winter's night and dropped in the middle of this cold cobblestone road.

Standing by its head, Morgan looked down into the horse's eyes. Open and glassy, they were fixed particularly upon nothing in its upside down world. A dry leaf floated quietly on the mucous of the unblinking left eye.

"Let's go!" said Arthur.

"All right." And Morgan led his men further down the hill.

Not much further down the road, they came upon what could have been the horse's rider. The dwarf was sprawled face down on the pave-

ment: one hand clutching a broadsword, and the other, crumpled beneath its massive body. The small party did not stop this time, but continued on into the thickening brew. Around their feet swirled the fog, the fog that was gradually filling up the valley.

Soon bodies of dwarfs and horses became more common. White wisps played about the cooling flesh. Underneath the groundcover, the cobblestones wallowed in sticky puddles of thickening blood.

And so the group trundled on in silence and the fog crowded in all the tighter. Then . . . "Eep!" squeaked Arthur, clutching his hand to his throat. "I just stepped on a finger!"

"So?" asked John Clod with a slight flip of his head. "So wat?"

"But it wasn't hooked onto a hand or anything! It just rolled under my boot and made a little crunching noise. Oooog!"

"Ho HO! Let me tell you zat you are not yet a man, my fran! Look at John Clod!" Within a wink, he was on top of the nearest dead dwarf, jumping up and down. Out of the dwarf's chest rose a dull booming. And from there, Clod jumped onto its stomach to force a gurgle and a burp from the half-opened dwarf-lips. "You see," smiled the little man, hopping off in front of Arthur, "John Clod ees afraid of notting! J. C. ees a man!"

The group of men looked from Clod's broad grin to Arthur's frown. Then tightening his mouth, the boy sneered back. "Hah! I bet if you stepped on a finger like I did, you'd yell too!"

"A fingaire?" shouted Clod, jabbing his middle finger up under Arthur's nose. "John Clod laughs at a fingaire! Ho HO! A fingaire! I

laugh!"

"Humph!" snorted Arthur as he whirled away. He began striding down after the rest of the men.

Shortly past the bottom of the hill, Morgan spotted the bush with the handkerchief. "Hey," he shouted over his shoulder. "The mulberry bush looks like it's floating in the fog!" And as Morgan drew nearer, the groundcover came to fade and waft by in veils. Then, beneath the bush a clearing passed: out of the milling fog grinned a dwarf-head, torn somehow from its body without having the slightest disturbance done to its plume or shining helmet. And as another patch of misty air drifted by, the lips seemed to flicker out a smile.

"I don't see why I should have to go first," mumbled Morgan. "This is spooky!" He waited for the mayor and the other old man to catch up with him.

"It's going to take more than a flood," commented Mayor Wasserman, "to get the bloodstains off the cobblestones!"

"And the Transportation of the Deceased," added Flesherton Costick, "to Soil deep enough for Burial will be a Pickle!"

"We could just dump them into the gorge and save the tax-payers a lot of money . . ."

Although he was closer to the body of men, Morgan did not feel as comfortable as he thought he would.

The small party of investigators was fast approaching the middle of the valley and not only was the mist becoming thicker, but the stacks of corpses were growing higher. Walking became extremely difficult.

Arthur began picking his way through the heap of dead dwarfs and horses, when off to the left, a voice moaned drearily.

"What's that?" asked the mayor.

"I Shall go See," said Flesherton Costick. Raising his elbows to keep his balance, he clambered stiff-legged down the grassy bank of of the ditch.

"A younger person should've gone," thought Morgan. "What if the old man fell?"

"There appears to be a Dwarf still alive down here," came a voice from out of the fog-filled ditch. Morgan could see Flesherton Costick's top half, but nothing else. "What should I do with It?"

An awkward silence followed.

Not knowing what to say, Morgan kept quiet. "What does anyone do with a wounded dwarf?" he asked himself. "Do you fix him up so he can kill you or do you just look down on him looking up at you and . . ."

"Keel him!" spit out John Clod. "Keel him! Eef you doan want to, I weel!" And the little man grabbed up a sword that was sticking upright in the ditch and scrambled down to the side of the moaning dwarf. Clod raised the sword in both hands. "Zees ees for stealing my furneecture, you teef!" he shouted and plunged the sword down into the upturned face of the dwarf, squirming to get away. There came the sound of splintering cheek-bones. The dwarf's hands shot up to clutch at the sword; but they stopped short, suspended in mid-air, and slowly but slowly sank to the ground on either side of his shattered skull.

Wrenching and twisting, Clod rocked his weapon this way and that to free it from the dwarf's head. The sound of bone and gristle crackled up out of the ditch. Finally the eyesocket gave way and Clod raised his sword on high. "I teach heem, hey?" he asked loudly. The sparse whiskers around his mouth bristled with satisfaction, sparkled with moisture.

"That shall Certainly teach him to be a Dwarf!" added Flesherton Costick, kicking the motionless mass with his heavy boot. With a dull thud, the dwarf's head nodded and then lay still.

"An' to steal my furneeture!"

"That too . . ."

"Come on, you two!" interrupted Mayor Wasserman with a shout.

"We're moving on."

And the eight of them pushed on, climbing over bodies, avoiding craters and crawling where they could not walk, further further into Headless Valley.

Ahead in the distance, Morgan and his band sighted an iridescent glow suspended in the misty air. It was moving, moving slowly towards them. After the glow had floated this way and that and swelled a little more, two figures walking side by side could be seen within it. They had a torch between them. From somewhere out of the fog crackled a laugh as mocking as a magpie's. Mary halted stockstill, her nostrils flaring.

"Dwarts!" warned Flesherton Costick in a hoarse whisper.

"Get weaponth!" said Roger.

Morgan picked up a round shield that was lying unattended on the road and held it up before him. Caliburn was at the ready in his left hand. "It's difficult to find a decent piece of weaponry," observed Mayor Wasserman. "Everything is either ripped apart or so battered that it's useless. I guess this shield will just have to do." Bearing a sword and a shield, Roger Mellon came smiling back into the circle of light. He was proudly sporting a dwarf helmet that had come through the dwarf ambush unscathed.

"Why doan you geeve to me zat shield, hey?" asked John Clod of Flesherton Costick.

"Why do you not give me that Sword?" replied the white-haired man as he rummaged around for a weapon that was still intact. "Then you could Share the Umbrella of Massive Retaliation, that is, hide behind me!"

"I? I hide behine you? I show you who should hide behine who!" And with that, John Clod hopped all over waving his sword wildly about his head. He became so violent that Flesherton Costick had to defend himself with his shield.

Blank! Blunk!

A spark shot off the shield.

"Would you please Watch the Proverbial It, Clod!" Flesherton Costick demanded. "You just about Put my Eye Out!"

"An' I feint an' I parree an' I mak riposte, an' I poke here an' dere . . ."

"Clod," warned the white-haired man once more. "If I did not know your Parents better, I would say you came from a Poor Family Indeed!"

Again the hideous laughter rang out. The pair, stopping their sparring, returned their faces towards the growing globe of misty light. The hairs on Mary's neck bristled. Morgan gripped his sword tighter. "Hey ho!" came a voice from ahead.

"Hey ho!" answered Morgan, heartily relieved. "It's Gobble!"

"eeYAUGH!" Mary skittered nervously at Morgan's side.

"It's all right, Mary," soothed Morgan. "It's only Gobble and Blung. They're not dwarfs. They're dwarfs." But Mary did not understand and refused to calm down.

The two circles of light merged. "Well," said Gobble, eyeing Mary suspiciously, "you found your mule all in one piece, it seems?"

"Yes," said Morgan. "And Mary rescued me in battle just in the nick of time."

"Well, well, well," exclaimed Gobble. "Isn't that lucky?"

Baring her teeth, the mule lunged forward. But the dwarf thrust the torch into Mary's face so she fell back, snorting and tossing her head. "Do you mind calling off your friend Mary?" asked Gobble. "Dwarfs and mules don't get along very well."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know that." Morgan gripped Mary by her scruffy mane and pulled her back.

"If you were at all well-read, you'd know that! But that's beside the point. Let's take a look at the bridge. It would be a shame

if we blasted it apart." Together the dwarfs and men picked their way through avenues of dwarf-shells to come to the edge of Gorgeous Gorge. Froth and fume tumbled and played over the drop. "Hold your torches up high," ordered Gobble. "Can anyone make out if the bridge is still standing?" The three torchbearers, Gobble, Wasserman and Arthur, stood peering into the swirl.

"The fog's too thick," said Mayor Wasserman, shaking his head.

"We'll have to get closer then."

"Come on, Morgan!" sang out Arthur. "Let's take a look."

"All right."

Morgan and Mary jogged along behind Arthur who was skipping daintily in, out and over the heavy corpses that lined the narrow path.

All of a sudden Mary stiffened. "eeYAGH!" Under Arthur's nose a dark green form sprang fiercely up from a hiding place among the fallen soldiers. Then up rose another and another and another.

"Wow!" screamed out Arthur. He put his hands to his mouth.

"Dwarts!" But to everyone's surprise, the dwarts did not throw Arthur into the gorge, nor did they even raise a hairy fist to smash him to bits. Instead the half-dozen dwarts, wailing and screaming, clapped their hands to their heads and galloped back across Turkey's Neck Bridge.

"Argggh," hollered one dwarf. "Kip awye! Kip awoo!"

"No more blaggard lightning stourm!"

"Halp! Halp! Halp!"

And the dwarfs continued to dash howling along the path on the opposite side of the gorge.

"Well, how about that?" asked Gobble half aloud.

"We've broken the crapped dwarf with the spirit!" shouted Roger gleefully.

"After the chicken dwarfs!" whooped John Clod and pushed past Morgan and Arthur on the narrow path. Waving his captured broadsword above his head, he rushed off after the fleeing dwarfs. Under the heavy load, his spindly wrist wobbled unsteadily, but did not buckle. "Remember my furniture!" wailed Clod and disappeared into the milky brew. "Après le déluge, moi!"

"Horror!" wailed the dwarfs.

"Hurrah!" cried Flesherton Costick.

"Ow wow wow wow!" screamed the dwarfs all the louder.

"Wow oh boy oh boy oh ho wow!" laughed Arthur who was in hot pursuit, pelting the dwarfs with rocks and sticks. He faded into the mist, but his torch could still be seen bobbing and weaving along the black shadow that was the edge of Gorgeous Gorge.

"To the Fore!" shouted Flesherton Costick somewhere on the valley side. "Remember Brine J. Stackhouse! Remember the Casus Belli!"

Abandoned by Arthur, Morgan was left leaning against the battle-marked rock-facing in the night's clammy darkness. But soon enough, another torch came jogging along down the narrow path with Flesherton Costick, Roger Mellon and Mayor Wasserman. Bringing up the rear huffed

and panted Old Tom. "Onward to Glory!" cried a voice in Morgan's ear. A thick body nudged him along. "Onward to Mop-up and Victory!"

"Gobble? Gobble?" shouted Morgan as he trundled along ahead of the shoving bodies. "Shouldn't we wait for Gobble?" he shouted again but nobody heard. Up and over the bridge ran the young king, his mule at his side and his loyal troops thundering along behind him. But there was no Gobble, no Blung and no Nespul.

Callop! Callop! Callop!

"Take zat an' zat an' zat . . .," screamed Clod out in front, hacking and hewing at the heels of the slowest dwarf.

"Owch, owch, owch!" bawled that dwarf. "Hevn't we hed enow from you big bad men?"

"Nevaire!" chortled Clod triumphantly. "Ho ho HO!"

"Ow, the thews and sinews of Lindenbane are runt asunder!"

"We'll nuvver be safe with these hoptoads arter ovr hides!"

"It's inter the sea with us!"

And with those moans and groans, the dwarfs ducked into the rocky gap from which they had issued so fresh and bold that very same night, and hot on their heels followed the men.

"Wahoo!" screamed Flesherton Costick ecstatically. "We've Got 'Em now!" Inside the tunnel Morgan's ears filled with the clatter of hobnails on stone, heavy breathing, the jangle of arms on armour and the merry but magnified sounds of the chase.

"Up an' at zem!"

"Wow oh wow!"

"eeYAUGH!"

"Put every Last One of them to the Sword!"

"Yoicks!"

"Oy, wite for me, King Morgan! Wite for me!"

And out of the other end of the dark tunnel poured six yowling dwarfs, seven howling humans and one braying mule into the suddenness of the clear night air.

"AH HAR!" roared out a thousand dwarf throats.

"eeYAUGH!"

A gigantic wall of armed dwarfs, both foot and mounted, rushed out of the shadows to encircle the frail party of humans. "AH HAR!" A whole company of dwarfs moved in behind. "AH HAR!" A thousand bright broadswords at one stroke sizzled out of their thick iron scabbards to level at Morgan and his troop.

One of the two dark figures standing tall in the centre of the monstrous dwarf-circle stepped a pace forward, clicked his heels and cleared his throat.

"Ahem!"

All fell silent.

"Kink Morgan, " sneered Eifer Cowpers, "I would very much like to take this opportunity to introduce you to my kink, Kink Lindenbane."

Motionless as a post, the cloaked dwarf-king, elevated by his position uphill, loomed against the starry horizon. His face, cowl-

shrouded, was but a hole of darkness. Morgan's eyes bulged out, strained painfully against their sockets, as he, stricken dumb, froze in his hobnail boots.

As high as the moon, Iryntor towered before him at the end of a very very long ribbon of road that wound up, up and around the steep and rugged mountainside.

the dwarf-storm at Iryntor

"Wow! We're surrounded!"

"eeYAUGH!"

"Oy, it's a ruddy trap!"

"How I with I wath thafely home between the coverth!"

"Let this be a Lesson to you: One Can Never Trust a Dwarf to Play Fair!"

"Help! Help! Help!"

And amidst all the panic and surprise, Mayor Wasserman leaned over and tugged Morgan's sleeve. "What, King Morgan, do you propose to do in this situation? It looks fairly grave in my opinion."

A vacant expression stole over the young king's face. "Do?"

But before any decision had to be made, a shrill voice rang out and rattled off the craggy cliffs and walls of Iryntor. "Let us keeeel zose feelty dwarrrrrts!" And there was John Clod, armed with a stout dwarf-sword, running up the hill towards the two shadowy figures.

Morgan's mouth froze open at the sight. John Clod was screaming fit to kill, galloping directly for Eifer Cowpers. A paleness creeping over his moonlit face, Cowpers began to back up, then stumble half-turned towards the thick line of dwarf warriors. But too late. John Clod fell upon him like the pint-sized fury he was and drove his gleaming broadsword deep into Eifer Cowpers' heaving stomach. There was a

white flash of flab and gristle under the moon, but it soon darkened over with a rosy flush, then an inky shadow.

"Dat ees for ze traitors!" shouted Clod triumphantly as he saluted the sky with his bloody sword. Before him, Cowpers doubled over upon his spilling gut bags and teetered for a painful moment. He then collapsed sideways.

Cowpers' eyes were wide with disbelief as he looked over his shoulder at the lofty dark figure standing uphill against the night.

"Safe me! Ach! Safe me, Kink Lindenbane!"

But Lindenbane did not move a finger.

"Safe poor me! Ow! I tolt you . . . You are my frients!"

Nor did a one of the mountainous dwarfs step forward to aid the gasping man on the ground. John Clod grinned a white flash in the night and slowly circled his former mate, Eifer Cowpers. "I weel teach you to feenk, you voyou!" Clod moved luxuriously in and straddled Cowpers' stomach. "I weel teach you like a revolutionaire teaches a wortless feenk revisioneeste!"

And with that, Clod lowered his blade into Cowpers' stomach and grinned again. He threw a cocked eyebrow up at the circle of watching dwarfs. "Where are your frans now, hey?" Gripping the handle of the broadsword all the tighter, Clod staggered uphill. Ripping and clunking, the blade plowed through stomach walls, diaphragm, ribcage, heart, thyroid, windpipe and chin until there was a furrow, both wide and black, from Cowpers' navel to his nostrils. The body between Clod's legs twisted slowly to the ground, a slack and unmoving waste. Dead meat.

A silence hung over dwarfs and men alike. Only the hurried breath of John Clod could be heard over the gentle wind. Then Lindensbane raised his right hand before his face and snapped his fingers. Eight of the largest dwarfs came alive. Stepping forward, they casually readied their shields and grinned broadly amongst themselves.

"Oh oh," gulped Morgan as he crowded up to Mayor Wasserman. He felt Mary crowd up to him. "Oh, oh!"

"This doesn't look good at all," commented the mayor.

"Well, good-bye, Mayor," whispered Morgan. "I'm sorry we didn't get to know each other very well. Maybe we could have worked out a better plan . . . Good-bye, Mary. You were the best mule I ever had,"

But at that exact moment, a whistle screamed overhead, then another and another one. The sky exploded into a solid sheet of white.

"The dwarfs are throwing flying bombs!"

"Help is on the way!" screamed Morgan. His face was alight with hope, as well as magnesium flashes.

"HURRAH! KILL THE DWARFS!"

And in the face of what seemed to be certain disaster, the tiny party of ill-equipped musicians rushed up the hill. The eight dwarfs frowned around at the explosions, but when they caught each other's glance, they nodded and smiled. The dwarf bombs were pouring down all the faster. Some exploded in the watching ranks and caused those dwarfs to hustle out of the way.

"WE'LL FIGHT TO THE LAST DROP OF BLOOD!"

Pressed firmly between Mary and Mayor Wasserman, Morgan found himself charging up the hill towards the shadow-covered face of Lindene. John Clod's sweaty little face, half crazed with joy, bounced all over before him.

"HURRAY FOR MORGAN, SON OF JOHN!"

Under the clear night sky, a metallic clatter rose up as the two forces, dwarfs against men, crashed together. Dwarf bombs burst on high like growing, glowing flowers, while below swords flashed, clashed and sang, shields battered and bunted one against the other and fists grated on leather and steel.

It was then that Morgan fell free of the mule and the mayor. And with his mouth hanging open, he watched the battle unfold.

"You son of a peeg!" shrieked John Clod. He was happily hammering his bloody broadsword against the thick shield of the first of the eight dwarfs. "Ah ha! Take zat and zat! I feint, I pass en seconde, I parree, and now I mak une petite retraite! Ah ha! Take zat!"

Flesherton Costick, who never did find a sword, had to satisfy himself by wielding his shield in both hands over his head. With righteous indignation, he brought it down wherever he could, hoping to stun and knock down whichever dwarf was closest. Fighting valorously, Mayor Wasserman became separated from Morgan and was soon lost in the crowd of shields and elbows. And Roger Mellon was no where to be seen. Old Tom, who was armed with nothing more than his tuba, set to harrassing his particular opponent. Grasping a shield, Old Tom huffed and

puffed as he pounded the side of the dwarf's face and body with the tuba's flaring mouth. "Oy! Oy'll show ye a thing or two! Oy! Oy!" And in between tuba-strokes a mighty COMPAH would roar out and set the whole mountainside quaking.

"Har har!" laughed the neighboring dwarf. "Owld Coffbur's got himself a live wire!" And the rest of the dwarfs laughed most horridly at this.

Then to Morgan's great surprise, there came to tower before him a dwarf as big and broad as a Tubbersport bungalow. "Har har har! Mince-meat! Har har har!" The awesome sight lumbered down the mountain towards the boy. Then, not very far behind the dwarf lines a flying bomb exploded. Morgan could see nothing but a frozen black and white image of a dwarf face before him.

The next thing he knew he was flying head over heels, his legs entangled around some unbendable object. Tiny stars and wheels still buzzing before his eyes, Morgan looked up to see the huge dwarf poking a broadsword between his legs. "No fair tripping, you big green meanie!"

"Har! Har!"

Every dwarf in the ugly circle snickered and snorted, tears streaming from his eyes. Some were leaning on their shields, others on their neighbor's shoulders, all giggling furiously and guffawing. Others yet could not stand as they were laughing so hard: they were sprawled all around the miniature battlefield.

"They're just playing with us!" realized Morgan. "Just having fun before they do us in!" So he shouted out, "I'm going to chop you up into little bits, you big fat dwarf!" Morgan sprang angrily up, Caliburn flashing royally in the night. But unhappily enough, before Morgan could rise to his feet the dwarf poked the boy's shield with the end of his shovel-nosed sword. Poor little Morgan plopped back down onto the hard ground again. This happened once, twice, and thrice; and each time the dwarfs exploded with horrible mocking laughter. Mary rushed up, her hooves flashing, but the dwarf merely batted her away with the flat of his broadsword.

"Gah! Get away!"

Half-crying with shame and anger, Morgan felt his face and neck flush a warm crimson. "You smart alec dwarf!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "You just let me near you! You big bully!"

"I'm a Big Bully! I'm a Big Bully!" crowed the dwarf. And with a smirk, he bowed left and right to all his friends who were snorting and choking around the battlescene. Mary took immediate advantage of this and leaped forward. Sailing past the iron shield, she clamped her teeth around the dwarf's wrist to imprison his sword hand.

"Auuurgggh! Stinking heap of mule-flesh!" screamed the dwarf. "Ow owch ow! Leggo! Leggo! Ow! Ow!" Swinging his wrist up and down and back and forth, the dwarf tried to shake off this troublesome bag of bones. But Mary refused to let go. Her old teeth held firm as she flapped around at the dwarf's side like a rag in the mouth of a playful dog.

Released from battle by this surprising turn of events, Morgan sat up and wondered. "Good old Mary," he said to himself. "She always comes through in a tight spot!" Then out of the corner of his eye he saw a crouching figure dash under the dwarf's shield and stop between his outstretched legs. It was Arthur! He flicked out his tiny knife and gripped it in both hands. Up drove the fine blade into soft, yielding dwarf flesh.

Quietly the dwarf stopped shaking Mary. A blank look crept over his face and his eyes drifted far far away. Without uttering even one little sound, the dwarf tumbled over to land with a tinny crash at Morgan's side. Amazed and at the same time overjoyed, the boy swung his sword at the dwarf's head and neatly clipped off the plume that puffed and lifted in the slight nightwind.

"Strike to kill!" shrieked Arthur and flew on the moaning mass of dwarf. In just one curved slice, he released a barrellful of hot red blood from the dwarf's jugular vein. "Don't piddle around!"

"I'll try to remember that," said Morgan wistfully as he struggled to his feet. But Arthur was off and did not hear.

Then from out of the blue the combined weight of Mary and an attacking dwarf knocked Morgan further up the hill. Tangled together, the mule and the dwarf rolled back down the hill, leaving Morgan all alone.

But before him stood a lone tall figure.

Slowly slowly with his one visible arm, his right, Lindenbane drew his side-piece from out his scabbard. His sword appeared to be as

finely-wrought as Morgan's. Its flash certainly rivalled Caliburn's.

The dwarf-king, his cowled black cloak wrapped tightly about him, advanced one careful step at a time.

Clump!

Clump!

Clump! down the rocky mountainside towards the shivering boy.

"Well," said Morgan to himself, spitting on his hands. "Here goes nothing!"

Gripping his sword firmly in both hands, he tapped the dirt in front of him several times and flashed Caliburn around in the air about his head. Caliburn moved smoothly, almost weightlessly.

Oddly enough, Morgan felt remarkably cool and collected.

The black hole, all that Morgan could see of Lindenbane's face, moved silently closer. The dwarf king's sword raised on high, caught a moonbeam to flash a spiderweb of silver in the night.

Swish!

Lindenbane struck first with a sideways slash to the neck, but unsuccessfully as Morgan parried instinctively. Blue sparks exploded from the two dwarf-wrought swords.

Once more Lindenbane attacked and once more Morgan warded off a death-blow.

But just as he was about to strike again, a flurry of flying bombs exploded close at hand. A garish blue-and-white light lit up the

field, or rather, mountainside of battle. For the first time that night, Morgan saw the deep, burning eyes of Lindenbane.

More deadly than his sword were the dwarf-king's eyes: they shot a knife-glance deep into Morgan's spine marrow. The boy stood transfixed, frozen. Even if he wanted to, Morgan could not lift his arm, sword or shield as a defense.

But then, luckily for Morgan, a hopping and popping series of flying bombs fell upon the battlefield, flooding it with blinding white light.

Lindenbane was obviously annoyed by this rude interruption. He jammed his sword into the ground beside him and glared, right arm akimbo, at Morgan as if it were his fault.

His right hand heightened, gnarled as a tree trunk, towards the heavens. From out the cowl's black hole an oath broke forth rumbling over the battlefield and thence roared skywards:

Blaze out light and rumble thunder,
Punydwarf-storm smash asunder!

Seizing up his sword in both hands as the stars quivered, Lindenbane brought a swift stroke downwards. The sky fell apart. Lightning and thunder! Morgan reeled under the flash and the roar, and a heavy weight crashed down upon his shield. He fell upon his back.

Dazed, Morgan propped himself up on one elbow. Through a clean-cut gash across his shield, he caught sight of Lindenbane standing over

him, grinning horribly against a lashing net of lightning. Bolt followed bolt and Lindenbane's face, bathed in darkness, leaped alight a split-second at a time, lurching brokenly with each blazing blast that shook the battlefield.

A mighty wind swept up, bearing inhuman laughter. It ripped back Lindenbane's cowl, revealing an ugliness, glorious and unparalleled. Baring his tombstone teeth, the dwarf-king, master of the elements, threw back his head and issued a howling cackle that whipped and cracked in the storm's breath.

Lightning and thunderbolts shook the air and ground simultaneously.

"Please, oh please," begged Morgan, "if ever I have need of you, Caliburn, I need you now!"

And in Morgan's hand amidst the howl and swirl of the tempest, Caliburn came to life, blazed like a lightning storm itself.

Lindenbane, seeing Caliburn's gathering of power, incited his sword to do likewise. "Calibolg! Kill Caliburn!"

Of its own accord, Caliburn rose arm's length above Morgan's head to come plunging down like a firebolt upon Lindenbane's unprotected brow. But Calibolg was quicker. Above the tumult of the storm, a clash rang out that shook the very roots of Iryntor. The meeting of the two swords, both driven by the dwarf-magic within them, caused a scintillating shower of sparks to wash over the whole mountainside.

But Caliburn soon proved Lindenbane's sword to be of baser metal. Hack! Hack! The dwarf king was driven back, driven uphill under the onslaught of Morgan's Caliburn.

The horrifying features of his furyface, from his cleft-chin to his sagging earlobes, twisted grotesquely as Lindenbane was pushed back and back in full view of his army. An oath foamed upon his lips and boomed into the night:

Blaze out a bolt all mighty, Storm,
The sight of man to twist, deform!

Morgan's sword bore down with tremendous force upon Lindenbane's and, at the same moment, a blinding lightning bolt, unequalled before or since in brilliance and volume, split the heavens. Everything halted for a seeming split-second. All warriors froze in uncompleted action. Caliburn welded to Calibolg. The boy and the dwarf-king were one. Then the thunderblast, following hard upon, flattened dwarfs and men alike.

Lindenbane alone stood erect.

As the peals of thunder rolled away across the sky, Morgan's ringing ears could only hear maniacal laughter shaking the night.

Then all was still. All was black.

When Morgan opened his eyes, he nearly screamed aloud at what he saw. One eye beheld the towering Lindenbane, hair blowing freely in the wind and his cloak flapping like sailcloth about his legs; and the other, a white-boned skeleton dancing against a blood-red mountain swirling in blue fog.

Screams rent the air.

Morgan whirled around towards these tortured shrieks and in his double-vision saw Old Tom running wildly about in his tuba, rubbing his eyes; and at the same time, in the same place a snapping and snarling bulldog was encased in a monumental chocolate doughnut. The whole crazy combination spun around and around upon a tottering vine-covered table. The vines blinked on and off and crawled all over themselves.

Dwarts, half-themselves and half-mushrooms, lay scattered about pulsing quietly. And John Clod was himself and a giant purple frog jumping skywards. Up he would leap, only to come crashing down on his back, again and again. Flesherton Costick half took the form of a king-sized chamberpot, pure-white and porcelain; and hard by was Arthur, divided between himself and a pink meatpie engulfed in shimmering silver foil. But the most horrific transformation was that of Mary the mule: she was suspended betwixt heaven and the earth, half-herself and half-hurmingbird.

Seized with a madness, Morgan whirled about upon Lindenbane and screamed, "You did all this!" He brought Caliburn, half-silver and half-sausage, down upon the breast of the magician. "You made me see funny!"

But instead of seeing the dwarf-king-skeleton crumble under the blow, Morgan saw Caliburn burst asunder into small pieces upon a blazing globe in Lindenbane's left hand. Morgan's sword hand stung with the pain of a thousand serpentbites, but he could not notice.

The strange circle of light in Lindenbane's hand!

Out of this fantastic orb spun a whirlpool of iridescence which bathed the mountainside in a peacock's variety: throbbing ultraviolets, vibrating blues and emeralds, searing yellows, oranges and humming infrareds. All else, Lindenbane, Iryntor and the thousand dwarf-mushrooms, faded in the superdiamond brilliance that grew and grew until only it was visible. Finally Morgan himself felt lost, nowhere, nothing.

Just the commanding dazzle of the swirling rainbow.

"You've been a bad little boy!" echoed a voice from out of the void. A strong hand grasped the back of Morgan's collar and lofted him high into the double-strength air. He was carried upwards, up the winding path to Iryntor.

Up, up, up.

Then down, down, down into his own jacket he sank. All became black save what he could see through a crack in his coat with his right eye.

The battle-scene was transformed into a scarlet lawn strewn with dancing oranges, mushrooms and parrots. Waterfalls of velvet poured slowly over jellyfish fences and splintered gently into rainbow-fragments of flowered glass.

And Lindenbane, wrapped in his long black flowing robes, carried King Morgan up the hill by the scruff of his neck as he were an errant schoolboy being dragged out of class for the strap.

Then all was a crystalline azure sky, balancing delicately around its centre: a diving and darting hummingbird.

The enchantment was too much for Morgan.

A peace, interrupted only by the dull roar of the ocean, surrounded him like a warm plastic bag.

A black wave rolled over his world.

the lowest dungeon

"What's this?"

"Looks like a dead shitska to me, Carlpish."

"So what are we supposed to do with it?"

"Um . . . let's see. It should be marked some place. Ah, red with black stripe. Where's my codebook?"

"This it, Sturk?"

"Aye, gimme."

"Catch."

"Um. Red paint . . . red paint . . . ah, here we are. 'Red paint with black stripe: Torture and behead.' Must be alive if we're to torture it. Well, I guess we'll have to cut coffee short tonight."

"Oh crap! Why do we have to do all the work around here? Can't we even enjoy a peaceful coffee without some doughhead dumping another assignment on us!"

"That wust the king what brought it in, Carlpish."

"King or no king, I don't care. The day-shift should do a bit of honest labour for once in their lives!"

"Well . . . the codebook doesn't say 'immediately'."

"There you go! We don't have to do it, Sturk!"

"But King Lindenbane maut not like it if we put it off . . ."

"Heck! What about us? Don't we rate around here? Besides, we're short-handed as it is. Feskill and Nurd had to go on emergency patrol."

"Well . . . if you're willing to take the responsibility . . ."

"Crap, I don't care! Nobody'll know."

"I guess we could put it in the Lowest Dungeon for the night."

"Good dwarf! I'll trot it downstairs and you make a note in the logbook that says day-shift is supposed to take care of the shitska."

"You'll sign it?"

"I'll sign it if you're too garbazzle chicken to!"

"All right."

Groggy though he was, Morgan felt himself being picked up by the seat of his pants. The sensation of moving, of suddenly leaving the cold stone floor, made him open his eyes.

A solitary candle, perched on top of a high desk, glimmered feebly, crowded by the surrounding gloom. Sitting on a high stool, a dwarf crouched over the desk like a circus-bear in shirtsleeves and suspenders.

"Put the coffee on," said Carlpish. "I won't be a minute."

"It's on," said Sturk as he scribbled a stubby pencil across the thick page before him.

The dwarf carrying Morgan pulled a ring of keys from a peg on the stone wall. With a jangle, he wrenched one smartly about in a key-hole and shot back the bolt. The mighty metal-latticed door banged open and an iron echo resounded from out of the unlocked depths. In his free hand, Carlpish grabbed a lantern, its windows yellow with ages of wax, and started to clump down into the cold and clammy heart of Iryntor.

Each step of the wandering staircase provided Morgan with a breath-taking jolt. Down and down tumbled the stairs, down and down and around through the mountain's core like a poisoned snake thrown into a mudbog in times long past.

"Ooof! Ooof! Ooof!" grunted Morgan.

But Carlpish took no notice and continued his gallop.

"Hey! Take it easy, would you!" shouted Morgan when he was able.

The jolts in his stomach halted abruptly and the twisting stairway passage flipped upright. Morgan found himself face to face with the ugliest dwarf he had ever seen. The skin on the dwarf's greasy nose was riddled with pockmarks and in places, pulled smooth and red with pustulent sores. His hair was sparse, ripped out in patches by some disease, and his eyebrows and lashes were missing altogether. The stench of rotten fish polluted the air whenever the dwarf breathed out.

"You say something?"

"Ork! Stop squeezing me! I can hardly breathe!"

"So you're alive, hunh?"

"I won't be much longer if you keep squashing me!"

"You wust just fooling us, wusn't you, smart guy!" the dwarf snarled into Morgan's face. "I bet you overheard everything me and Sturk wust saying!" A scarlet pimple the size of an eyeball popped open as the dwarf sneered. A thick white liquid oozed out. "You're not going to tell day-shift what we wust saying, are you?"

"Ouch! I don't even know what you were talking about! You're hurting me!"

But the dwarf did not relax his grip. Instead he pressed his greasy nose against Morgan's and stared hard into the small boy's eyes.

"If you do, I'll eat you!"

"I won't tell! Just stop squashing me!"

"Promise?"

"Promise!"

The dwarf slackened his hold on Morgan's pants.

"O.K. But if you snitch . . .!" The dwarf opened his mouth wide and started to stuff Morgan's head in.

"I won't! I won't! Honest!"

So once more down the stairs clumped the dwarf. Morgan bumped and scraped against the dampness of the green wall.

"Why are you taking me to the Lowest Dungeon?" asked Morgan.

"Same reason we throw all men in the clink!"

"And why is that?"

"Breaking one of the owldest laws of the land."

"What's that?"

"'Any-man-who-is-discovered-where-he-has-no right-to-be-shall-be-imprisoned-awaiting-judgment-at-the-pleasure-of-the-king.' The Lethal Code of Tilantes: Section III; sub-section iv. It's been on the books for centuries!"

"But that's just a trespassing law!"

"You're a man and nowhere in the rolebook does it say that you've got a right to be. The king's judgment and pleasure is that you're tor-

tured and executed tomorrow by day-shift. Remember that if anybody asks: by day-shift!"

"But that's silly! That's not what the law means!"

"That's what it says!"

"But that's not fair!"

"Tough rocks."

Morgan, realizing that the conversation was not as pleasant as it could have been, decided to let the whole thing drop.

Finally after several silent minutes of snaking down and around, around and down, the stairs ended abruptly. Carlpish tossed Morgan onto the stone floor and hung the lantern up on the wall.

"Whew!" exclaimed Morgan. "It's nice to breathe again!"

But Morgan's relief was brief. Looking around the tiny space, he saw rusted rings bolted all around on the stone wall, some of which still had bones dangling from chains. Carlpish was hunched over a rough-hewn block of wood with one leather-booted foot plopped firmly on top of it.

"Well, what do you want for breakfast?"

"You mean I actually get a choice?"

"You sure do!" chortled the dwarf, picking up an enormous axe. "Either the north or south end of the chopper!" And with that, Carlpish swung the double-bitted axe around in a swishing arc to bring it deeply down into the wood beside his foot.

"Har har har!" laughed the dwarf and wiped some of the spit away from the corner of his mouth. "But not before you dance a little

first!" Grabbing one of the massive iron rings bolted to the wall the dwarf shook it. The attached chain rattled and clanked.

"But now it's time to go beddie-byes."

The iron ring fell heavily back into place as Carlpish reached for his keys. "Grrr! Lazy day-shift!" he growled at a small basket in front of the chopping block. "Can't they even clean up after themselves?" And with that, the dwarf gave the basket such a healthy boot that it hit the wall behind Morgan with a whump. Out rolled a bloody round lump!

A head!

Brine Stackhouse's head!

Morgan recoiled with horror and loathing. At his feet was a familiar sight, poor Brine's head. It was lying on one ear, severed from its body, but it still had an impish grin on its face.

"A friend of yours?" asked Carlpish.

Morgan said nothing.

Bending over, Carlpish inserted one of his ponderous iron keys into a black keyhole in the floor. A clink and a scrape undid the lock and the dwarf swung the trapdoor upwards.

"In you go, shitska!"

But Morgan did not move. "I don't want to go in there!"

"I don't care where you don't want to go!"

With a hand as cold as a fish and as broad as a loom, Carlpish the ugly dwarf seized Morgan around the neck and swept him off his feet.

In the next instant, he dropkicked him neatly down into the black hole.

Bonk!

Morgan landed on his head on a freezing floor, thinly padded with dirty straw. The trapdoor slammed shut above him.

"Pleasant dreams, shitska!"

The lock scraped shut. The light around the cracks of the door soon disappeared and Carlpish's leather boots stomped away into the distance, step by step, leaving Morgan all alone and very sad.

the old man

The cell was not much more than a hole hewn into the bare rock and this was indication enough that the prison walls were as thick as the mountain itself. The centre of the ceiling held the only exit, and it was blocked by an oaken door, bound with iron-plate and stoutly fastened by a lock, the size of a peanut butter and banana sandwich.

As soon as Morgan recovered from the drop on his head, he scrambled to his feet and began jumping madly upwards, grasping at the trap-door. But each time he leaped, he caught only air. Back he would tumble into the muck and straw that littered the prison floor.

His attempts became feebler and feebler, until finally with a sob and a moan, he collapsed face downwards gasping for breath. "I want out!" wailed Morgan miserably. "I want out!" The long and empty expanse of stairway sent back pleading shouts and mocked him with a hollow " . . . want out . . . want out . . . tout."

"Boohooohoochoohoo!" sobbed Morgan. "I've never been more un-h-h-happy in all my b-b-born days!"

And the small boy continued to cry, neglected by everyone, everything, save his echo.

After a good cry, Morgan lay inert on the cell floor. He was more than half-buried by ages of trash and filth. Colder and calmer, he found himself both shivering uncontrollably and sweating in great

profusion. When the first bead of sweat trickled out of his armpit and rolled icily down over his ribs, he thought maybe he was bleeding.

Yes, Morgan was entirely miserable. His body ached from head to toe. His shoulder was paining him again, throbbing slowly but more noticeably with every heartbeat. Also his neck, which had been squeezed by the dwarf, was like a sore throat, only worse, as it shot pain up and down his spine whenever he moved his head. So he lay still.

But even as he lay there, he felt his stomach rolling around within him, growling and complaining, banging on his ribcage. He was hungry, exhausted by the night's exertions, but oddly enough, he did not feel like eating. The poor boy, hair matted with dirt and sweat, gave up all hope of ever seeing daylight again. In fact, he came to give up caring about anything. Nothing was important any more.

But then, blue sky and salt-spray crossed Morgan's mind and he felt within him an old stirring. But the sound of the headsman's axe plowing into the chopping block snuffed out the memory's small flicker.

thonk Thonk THONK!

Again and again the toll rang out in his ears. In the morning, aware of its fate or not, his body was going to part company with his head. This indeed was a gloomy prospect with which to spend the night.

But then a tickle in his lower abdomen caught Morgan's attention. Nourished by an eveningful of Guinness and prodded by a hard night's fray, his bladder felt that now was the time for a decision. Urgent messages for relief soon overwhelmed and tortured his higher conscious-

ness and bade him forget all these temporary sorrows and do something of a more lasting and monumental nature.

"I should pee my pants," thought Morgan. "That'd show them!"

But the more he thought about it, the more he came to realize that no one would benefit from such an action; and that he, and he alone, would suffer all the contingent woes. Clutching the clammy wall and pressing against the equally clammy floor with his hands, Morgan staggered to his numb and unresponsive feet. Feeling gingerly for unseen pitfalls, he made his way around to the opposite wall where, without hesitation or ceremony, he relieved himself.

"Ahhh," Morgan sighed heartily. "That certainly feels better!"

But as soon as he found his way back and sat down, a dark cloud once more moved across his brow. The morning, the morning was coming. Dismal dismal Wednesday morning.

"How nasty of those dwarfs to keep me penned up in here. Just like a suckling pig in the morning! I think it would've been better to have died on the battlefield. Struck on the head and have done with it! Or even executed immediately . . .

"This way, I have to think about it all night long. But I suppose even if I did get executed earlier, I would have regretted it sooner or later . . .

"Or would've I? Now let me see . . ."

As Morgan was tossing this weighty problem over and over, a tiny glow on the other side of the cell stole away his attention. The glow

grew and grew until it was no more than just the brief outline of an old man in the darkness.

"My heavens," thought Morgan to himself. "My eyes are just now getting used to the dark! And there's been somebody in here all along listening to me howl and cry!" He flushed at the thought and then his heart jumped into his mouth as he realized something else. "Oh no!" he moaned half-aloud. Swallowing regretfully, Morgan formed an apology in his mind and went over it several times before he said anything.

"Er . . . hi!" he began and scratched his nose. "I'd like to tell you . . . er, say . . . that . . . er, how sorry I am for . . . for . . . going to the bathroom over there where you're sitting."

"That's quite all right, son," answered the old man quite calmly, "but everyone else usually goes over there where you're sitting."

Morgan became unusually aware of the damp creeping up through his thin trousers. "Er . . . perhaps I had better move."

"Don't bother. One side is much like the other."

"Very well. I'll just stay here."

After this, neither of them said anything for a while. Morgan wondered for a busy moment or two whether or not it is polite to ask one's cellmate the reason for his being in jail. But after deciding that the old man seemed friendly enough and probably would not mind, he brought himself to break the silence.

"What are you here for?"

"Life," the old man croaked happily in reply.

"Oh, that's too bad! But I meant: 'What did you do?'"

"Do?"

"Yes. Like I'm here because I'm a people and there's a law against people. People are illegal."

"My, my," responded the old man slowly and shook his head. "Don't that beat all? That shore is an odd sort of law!"

"That's what I think too. It's the dwarfs who made it up.

Er . . . I mean, it's a law that was made up by people, but was taken over and twisted by the dwarfs."

"Made up by the people themselves?"

"Well," drawled Morgan, "it really is quite complicated."

"It seems to be."

"And I was leading an army of Tilantes' finest men against the dwarfs and we killed lots of them quite cleverly. But then they tricked us and beat us in a trap."

To this the old man said nothing.

"And I broke Caliburn, the indestructible sword, when I was fighting Lindenbane himself. Have you ever heard of an unbreakable sword getting broken?"

"Only on the rain-orb."

"On the what?"

"The rain-orb. The world pebble. The that-from-which. The fire shadow."

This set Morgan to thinking.

"Well," he said after a short while, "I don't know anything about those things, but I broke my sword on a funny ball that shot out colors. Tons of them!"

The old man furrowed his eyebrows.

"How big was it, son?"

Morgan showed him.

"So an ole dwarf found the rain-orb, hey?"

"Is it magic?"

"Hmm . . . I spose if anything is, it is."

"Just exactly what does it do?"

"You've never heard tell of it before?"

"Never."

"Well . . .," started the old man, shuffling around to get comfortable, "the rain-orb first showed up in this here world way back round the time the sky was water and nothing much earth-shaking was going on cuz everything was too dad-blamed wet." He paused and scratched his nose.

"Then one fine day the world-pebble fell outa the sun down down down until it splashed into the sky round about here somewheres and set up a parful passle of waves a-winkling and a-tinkling. And with the ole sun a-blazing up there on high and the little waves a-prancing and a-dancing down below, the purtiest colors you ever did see come a-sparkling and a-falling outa the sky.

"And lo and behole! What do you spose happened to the sky's bottom?"

Morgan, who just sat there with his mouth hanging open, shook his head.

"Well," whinnied the old man, "I'll tell you that all those colors hit that bottom going at such a terrific clip, one arter the other, just a lickety-split, that BINGO! Somepun had to give.

"That ole color black hit first as it was going the fastest, and smeared black so far and so wide that we still have a glorious amount of topsoil, licorice all-sorts and gumdrops, Model A's, ink-bottles and your good friends the shadows of the shadow.

"Then ole gray, coming right arter black, hot on her heels, hit the ground with such a heck of a whallop that enough iron-ore, dull ideas and dwarfs was knocked into the ground to make lamp-posts, cannons and schoolyard fences for as long's anybody is still caring to make 'em.

"Purty soon arter that, purtier colors come a-thundering down at such a rate that if you go down to the beach today and take a good look around you, by gum, you can see just how much blue and green there was a-falling outa the sky, once upon a time. And that's where we get your good friends the dwarts.

"Now the earth was still rattling when the brown come down. The one mighty crash that resulted from that managed to provide the trees of the forest for miles around with such a nice color of wood for their tree-trunks.

"And then last, but not least, come red, hot on the tail of brown, roaring fit to bust, and when it hit this poor ole earth, it rolled her over and she's been doing it ever since. Red, as it were

more flaky than most of the other colors, decided to bust up into tomatoes, stop-signs and red-heads, all o' which can cause trouble if you rub them the wrong way.

"Now if this tweren't enough, the ole rain-orb settled down up-on the face of all this creation and where it did, up sprang a monstrous protuberance as been of late called an island, this here island, although it tweren't called Tilantes until just a blink of the eyeball ago.

"Now the first water, the sky water, drained off somewheres or mebbe just turned into the water we have today--but small pockets of the stuff can still be found here and there, if you only care to look for it. Just one solitary little drop of the first water cures warts, feeds you forever, or if you will, just dazzle your ole eyebones with a shimmering rainbow of glory.

"But to get back to the story, all the creatures like horny-toads, dwarfs and their lot, watermelions, bugs, bats, rats and people, as well as a handful of dwarts--just being put together by various combinations of colors--all knew a good thing when they seed it, so they crawled up on top of the island and immediately fell to scrapping to see who could get the most sun on their bellies."

The old man, paused, took a breath and smiled.

"Frall I know, they're a-scrapping yet. And they'll probly be scrapping for a while to come too. That is, of course, until the rain-orb gets a notion to pop into another puddle of the first water and start the ole kettle boiling again.

"Course, nobody, even though he got a parful suspicion on him, never really can tell when or how. But it'll come, sure as you're sitting there, my boy. Have no doubts about that.

"Now does that answer your question, son? I remember you ast me a good 'un, but I can't rightly remember the partickle wording." The flow of words halted as quickly as it had begun. Morgan, who had been listening with wide eyes, ears and mouth, just blinked at the old man in reply.

"Hunh?" grunted Morgan. "Oh! I was just wondering what the rain-orb did. But I guess you told me. It . . . um . . . created the world or something like that."

"Now that's a bright lad," smiled the old man. "Not many boys your age woulda come up with that. Course, besides the fundymentals, the rain-orb'll do all sorts of things for you round the house: for a Special Introductory Offer, it'll grant you three wishes--but like most deals of this kind, you'd be a wise boy not to take it up on it! Or if you want, just mutter out a couplet in well-worn tetrameter and it'll whomp up a thunderstorm or a blue sky anytime and anywhere you wanta put it, tell your fortune or just shine your shoes. Only, it's best to just look at it , as when you start messing around with what you want, you starts to get into a bigger pickle than you bargained for, as it's probly not the same thing the man next door wants or wants you to want.

"It's kinda hard on the system, if you don't know how to handle it, heh, heh. That goes 'thout saying. But then again, not too many people have gotta worry about that, do they?" The old man winked.

Morgan just had to speak up.

"We have to worry about it! Lindenbane has it and I'm sure he's doing bad things with it. Look at the storm he made to beat us with. And a storm just like it killed King John last Friday! And I saw him change my friends into all sorts of horrid things: dogs, frogs, pots, pies, salt pillars and humming-birds! And who else knows what else he might be doing with it! It's just terrible and somebody should put a stop to it!"

Morgan looked up as if he expected the old man himself to do something about Lindenbane and the rain-orb. The old man just smiled his funny smile and shook his head. "Yep . . .," he drawled, "it's a bugger!"

Morgan sat back and looked as though he were going to cry.

"Don't look so glum, boy. That's just the way things are. If the rain-orb (who don't take orders from nobody) decides that's it's time to pull the plug, then it's time. There's no two ways about it.

"Now I'll tell you somepun that might cheer you up a bit. There'll be another world just beyond the old one that's just been shucked off. Just like this one come about. Only it'll be a brand-spanking-new one. Air what's never been breathed before. Wunnerful pipple! Great hospitality! You don't have to worry none."

Sniffing back a few tear-soaked snuffles, Morgan wrestled with the choke in his throat. His mouth twitched up and down at the corners. The old man looked away so that the boy could wipe away the tears in his eyes.

Then boosting himself up onto his knees, the old man resumed his chattering. "I'm not one to preach, heck, but look at the five worlds. They're not much better than robbers themselves. In fact they're about as mannerly as drunks in a barroom squabbling over the change or whose turn it is for the shuffleboard machine."

The old man dumped a handful of dirt into a bowl-shaped hole in the middle of the prison floor and said, "Now sposing you had World #1, the World of Earth. As soon as everything is going full blast here, along comes ole #2, the World of Iron, a-plowing right through the centre of Earth like this." Grabbing a bread-and-butter knife out of the shadows, the old man ran down one side of the bowl-shaped depression and neatly divided the pile of dirt into two.

"See?" he smiled. He then filled up the bowl with water, pouring from a battered old teapot that he had found close at hand. "Along comes the World of Water," chuckled the old man, "and the ole Iron finds himself sinking fathoms and fathoms into oblivion." The old man leaned over and winked at Morgan. He pointed to the puddle. "This here #3 is the world you're living in, my boy. Take a good look quick!"

Morgan stared at the muddy mess the old man had made and then looked up incredulously at his face. "Either this old gaffer is daft," thought Morgan, "or else I am!" But Morgan, who was always or most usually polite to his elders, just nodded and said nothing.

Crossing his legs, the old man picked up a wooden toyboat from out of the litter and plunked it on top of the water. The little boat sailed around and around, bobbing up and down.

"And here's the next one, #4, the World of Wood. This one's really the best one, or at least I think so. I wouldn't mind if I was right there now myself. But an ole man's gotta wait, same's everybody else, I spose."

"Is there any more," asked Morgan, "or is that the last one?"

Saying nothing, the old man kept his twinkling eyes fixed on Morgan's and snapped his fingers.

Zap!

Before Morgan's very eyes the little wooden boat burst into brilliant flame. It raced around in circles trying to escape its burning self.

"Don't forget the fire, son!" chuckled the old man. "World #5 is the World of Fire."

The tiny cell was now all aglow with the warmth of the flame. Soft colors rose to the surface of the gray stone walls, the floor, its litter and Morgan's ashen face and dirty skin. Shadows flickered with the flame here and there, but unlike the rest of the things in the cell, the old man grew pale, almost transparent.

And he cast no shadow whatsoever!

"And then that's it?" Morgan gulped. "Kaput?"

The old man smiled faintly. Scooping up another handful of dirt from out of nowhere, he sprinkled it over the deck of the burning boat. The flame died with a curl of smoke and darkness again descended upon the prison. What's more, the old man was nowhere to be seen! But then gradually, gradually his glowing outline once more took form against the wall.

"Now let's see," continued the old man, scratching his nose.

"I'm running out of good stories . . ."

"But, but . . .," muttered Morgan with a swallow, "what does this all mean? Why did you tell me?"

The old man looked at Morgan thoughtfully.

"One land was time, a what, and in which you are. One time was land, a who, and in which just be."

At this Morgan looked very perplexed.

"Aw heck," laughed the old man, "an old coot like me should learn when to shut his mouth and when to leave it open. I talk too much. I won't burden you no more with my gumming. Besides it's time for presents. Now let's see . . . What have I got in my bag for you?"

The old man rummaged around in a bag that he had been sitting on. After a lot of yanking and flapping of the old gunny sack, he eventually pulled out a blue glove, a glowing iron gauntlet. After blowing off the dust, he handed it to Morgan.

"Well . . . there's your present."

"Um," said Morgan. "Thank you. Just the one glove?"

"Just the one made," said the old man. "That's the goss-glove, King John's very own iron mitt! He lost it in a poker game. Wear it in good health!"

"Well, thanks. I guess this means we're friends, hey? Friends-in-keeping and all that?"

"Oh heck, we've allus been friends. Least I have. But friends-in-keeping? I don't know what you're talking about. But shore, we're friends. Why shouldn't we be?"

"Do I have to give you a present now?"

"Now why in all tarnation should you have to give me a present? For a bright lad like yourself, you shore do ast a pack of tomfool questions!"

"Um, well thanks again for the glove," muttered Morgan. "It's just what I've always wanted."

"Come on and put her on. Try her out."

Although he was left-handed, Morgan slipped the glove onto his right hand and wondered what there was to try out. But he had to admit that his hand was warm and comfortable inside the glove.

"Here," the old man said as he scrabbled to his feet, "get up on my back and take a poke at that troublesome ole trapdoor with your gossyglove."

"Well, O.K., if you want me to . . ."

Hunching over, the old man indicated to Morgan to hurry up. Morgan hurried and the old man helped him up on his back.

"Ooof! Lardy, you're a caution!"

Straightening up, Morgan knocked his head against the ceiling. The tower, the boy on the old man, wobbled unsteadily back and forth.

"Sock that glove into that door and see what happens!"

Feeling around with his left hand, Morgan located the door. He pushed up a bit, but the trapdoor would not give even a fraction of an inch.

"Hurry her up, young fella!" croaked the old man from below. "You don't exactly weigh in as a featherweight!"

And so Morgan brought his new iron mitt smashing upwards. To his surprise, his right hand penetrated the thick iron plating and the oak underneath. The door exploded before his eyes. What was left of it crashed back on its hinges and splinters came showering down upon Morgan's head and shoulders.

Above lay freedom!

"Crawl on out, lad," shouted the old man. "I can't be bothered supporting you very much longer."

So Morgan struggled to get out. While he was doing so, reaching here and there in the darkness for a handhold, the old man's voice drifted out of the hole in the floor.

"Be careful not to scratch your head with the goss glove on, Morgan!"

As soon as Morgan got out, he poked his head back into the dungeon and said, "If you give me your hand, I'll help you out too."

But no hand reached up.

Nor could Morgan see even the faintest glow in the silent darkness.

"Hello? Old man? Are you there?"

But all Morgan could hear was the la lub la lub of his own heartbeat.

"That's odd! He's gone . . . nowhere to be seen. And how did he know my name?"

Morgan scratched his head in bewilderment and sharply woke up to the fact that it hurt, indeed, scratching his head with the goss glove on.

escape!

The faint glow of the gossyglove reduced the murky blackness of the tunnel to a blue-tinged gloom that hung about the chains and bones dripping from the walls.

"Well," mused Morgan half-aloud as he sat upon the chopping block, "there's really no place to go except up and that's where the dwarfs are." He paused for a moment and chewed over what he had just said. "But then again, there's not much sense in staying down here, is there?"

So with that, he hopped off the block onto his feet and began to trudge up the spiral staircase. Although he had suspected it all along, Morgan soon found that walking up stairs was more of a job than being carried down. "Hoo boy! Each step seems higher than the last. Hoof! Of course, I'm in no real rush to get to the top . . ." Up and up he continued, huffing and puffing.

Presently he came upon a doorway, steeped in shadows, that he had not noticed on his way down. Rough-cast iron slats criss-crossed the doorframe to form a wall in itself. A metal lock with a keyhole the size of an eyesocket glowered out at him.

"My goodness," he breathed. "I wonder if that's a way out of here? Wouldn't it be nice if it was? But dare I investigate?" Stopping on the broader step in front of the door, Morgan peered through one of the open squares. He saw nothing but the dark, so he put his ear to

the hole and held his breath. Again nothing. "I suppose it's safe enough to try. I really don't have much choice in the matter anyway."

Gathering his feet neatly under him, Morgan coughed to clear his throat. Then he pushed the goss-glove right through the iron door's big metal lock.

"Just like soft ice-cream!" thought Morgan to himself and smiled. When he began to pull the door open, the rust-reddened hinges started to squeak and howl. "I hope Sturk and Carl-pish don't hear this!"

And with one concerted effort, Morgan yanked the sticking door wide open. A shriek escaped up and down the staircase. From every which direction, echo upon echo came screaming back in tell-tale mockery. And as if the iron gate had kept it in, a cloud of prison choke-damp, reeking of piss, stale air and vomit, rolled out of the pitch-black.

Crinkling up his nose, Morgan hesitantly dipped his head into the darkness and looked around. There was nothing but a wall of black. Holding the goss-glove up before him, he stepped inside.

"What do you want?" screeched out a voice.

Morgan jumped like he was shot in the dark.

There in the corner of what seemed to be a small cell huddled a wizened old figure, a fellow prisoner, whose eyes were sunken deeply into his skull. The skin was drawn tight and yellow over his aged bones.

"Oh, I'm sorry," stuttered Morgan. "I'm escaping from jail. I thought this might be the way out . . ."

Clutching his thin arms tighter around his knees, the old jail-bird simply stared back with hostility.

"Er, I thought . . . um," stammered Morgan, "that you could come along if you wanted . . ."

"Get out!" rasped the hollow-eyed man. "Let me be! Want none of your truck! Go!"

"All right . . . sure! I just thought I'd ask . . ."

"Get out! And close the door behind you!"

So Morgan left and, as he was told, banged the large door shut on the odd fellow inside. "I guess it's up I go," he mumbled for lack of anything better to say to himself. So he brought himself once more to the task of carrying his fat little body up over the crest of each flagstone and over to the next rise, over and over again.

By the time his laboured breathing had convinced him to take a bit of a rest, Morgan looked up ahead to see another door almost the double of the one before. This door proved quite different though, as two of the metal slats were surrounded by big stubby fingers.

"Hey shitska!" called some unknown voice from out of the black holes. "I hear you're springing us victims of society. How about busting me out of the pokey?"

Morgan peered past the hairy hands and the iron bars to make out the face of a dwarf. The dwarf's eyes were watery red and he snuffled a lot.

"You're a dwarf," said Morgan accusingly, "aren't you?"

"Aye, aye, a dwarf I am! But we're all kin. Come on there, be a good shitska and open up the yett!"

"Well . . . I don't know. What are you in for?"

"Falling to sleep on juty, nowthing more. But it's a hanging offense, to be sure! A lost lamb am I!"

"You're a dwarf! I can't let you out. You'd eat me!"

"Oooh, that's a fib and a sham! Who ever hurt of a dwarf eating anything but peanut butter and toad? Be a decent shitska! Hev mercy on a poor condemned mortal like yourself! I've a wife and childers to home and not taken a bite since the likes of yesterday's breakfast."

"No, I can't let you out," said Morgan after a thoughtful pause. "You're a dwarf and a hungry one. I'm sorry, I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

"Oh, chief!" wailed the dwarf. "You wouldn't want to liv an owld buddy in a hole like this, would you now?"

"I'm sorry," said Morgan and began to walk up the stairs, "but I really do."

"You'll be a lot sorrier if you liv without hearing the secret you maut be interested in knowsing!" the dwarf shouted after Morgan.

Morgan kept on going.

"And it's the secret hiding place of the rain-orb!"

At this, Morgan halted.

"And where would that be?"

"Oooh, I can't just shout it out. Come closser and I'll whuspert ye."

"Tell me from there!"

"Ooooooh noooo! That'd nuvver do. Secrets will be whuspert!"

Morgan hesitated, then moved down a step.

"Tell me!"

"Closser. I will whuspert int your ear."

Pausing first a moment, Morgan took the two remaining steps down to the landing before the prison door.

"Whisper away!" he said. "I haven't got all night."

"Ooooh, you'll hev to be closser than that."

"Well . . . all right," said Morgan as he moved closer and cocked his ear. "But this is as close as I'm going to . . . OW! Lemmigo! Hoop!"

The dwarf's huge hairy hand shot out and grabbed Morgan by his bruised and battered throat. All he could do under the paralysing grip was flop about feebly and kick his legs in the air.

"Now are you going to let me out or am I going to break every bowel in your body?" snarled the dwarf, banging Morgan up against the slats of the cell door.

"Lumme goo . . ." gurgled Morgan. "I cam breef!"

"I'll dumb well let you go when you opit the yett! I knowse you can too! I hurnt you opit the next one down, I did, I did."

Flash upon flash of Morgan's life passed before his eyes. Mary . . . sailing . . . chopping wood . . . Gobble . . . the old man . . . The old man! "The goss-glove!" thought Morgan instantly. "Why didn't I think of it earlier?"

Placing the thumb of the goss-glove on the back of the dwarf's hand, Morgan squeezed and twisted it back upon its wrist. The monstrous grip melted and Morgan fell free.

Bunkety-bunk . . . thump!

He rolled down four or five stone steps before he ground to a halt against the curvature of the wall.

"Agh!" croaked Morgan as he rubbed his throat. "You hurt me!"

But the dwarf heard nothing over his own bellowing. Inside his dark cell, he was jumping up and down and sucking his hand as he howled the most fearsome of roars.

"GROWWWWL! GARBAZZLE! WOWF!"

Wasting little time, Morgan crawled up the stairs and tried to sneak by the door as quickly as he possibly could. But the dwarf, who by no means was happy by Morgan's behavior, was watching at the bars.

"Come here, shitska! Come here!"

Ramming his arm between the bars, the dwarf took a swipe, but Morgan ran by.

"Arrrrgh! I'll get you yet, shitska!"

And Morgan scampered up the stairs as quickly as he could.

"Urrb farzgobbleuggle drat!" raged the dwarf and then fell back to shaking the prison door. The clangs and clatters were so violent that Morgan believed that the iron bars were soon going to give way. But instead, he heard the heavy body of the dwarf flop down on the cell floor. The most heartfelt weeping took the place of banging metal.

"Hoo hoo hoo hoo," the dwarf sobbed. "I've nuvver been so miserable in all my bad days! I'll nuvver see my hoo-hoo-hoo f-f-family ag-g-gain! Oh hoo hoo hoo . . ."

The escaping boy stopped and listened to the pitiful moans.

"Aw," said Morgan, "I just can't go away and leave him . . . Poor guy never did anybody any harm just by sleeping on the job . . ."

Morgan thought for a full minute before he walked slowly down the steps again. There, inside the door, huddled miserably on the cold floor was the dwarf holding his face in his hands. His shoulders heaved like giant waves with his every sob.

"Snnk," sniffed the dwarf. "Snnk, hoo hoo, snnkuhn!"

Morgan, looking at this sorry sight with thoughtful eyes, poised his gloved hand before the door's lock and with one jab of his index finger, he smashed it into smithereens.

"Hunh?" grunted the dwarf in surprise. "You've come back?"

"I couldn't just leave you here . . ."

"Now that's what I call a fine fellow!" beamed the dwarf and clambered up onto his feet. Towering higher than ever, the dwarf pushed open the prison door and stepped out. Morgan backed cautiously up the flagstone steps. With a bang, the dwarf slammed closed the door. Muscular arms akimbo, he stood grinning at his tiny liberator. His piggy eyes crinkled up at the edges as he moved slowly up the steps toward Morgan.

"Har har har!" the dwarf laughed dreadfully when his big face came up level with Morgan's. "Put her there, shitska! Stoolput's the name. I guess I'm owing you a favour and a secret!"

Suddenly realizing that he was not going to be eaten, Morgan clasped the hand and shook it. "Oh, I'm Morgan."

"Ooooch!" shrieked the dwarf. "For a shitska you do hev a mighty grip on you!"

Morgan bit his lip when he discovered that he was shaking hands with his glove on. "I'm dreadfully sorry. I didn't realize . . ."

"And I always thought that you people were such runty little punes. If I had only knowsen, I wouldn't hev taken up with the army."

"Do you suppose it's possible to get out of here," asked Morgan, "without being noticed?"

"With a fist on you like that, we should be able to go anywhere!"

"Then let's hurry, because I'm supposed to be tortured and executed come the morning."

"Hey! Me, too. How about that?"

So the dwarf and the boy, faced with a common fate, started up the stairway together.

"How about that other prisoner," asked Morgan of the new friend at his side, "in the next cell down? When is he to be executed?"

"Him? Nobody knows. In fact nobody even knows who he is. He wust in there before us dwarfs took over. I guess he'll just stay there 'til doomsday."

"He didn't want to leave. He told me to get out and go away."

"Odd fellow," said Stoolput and shook his head.

"And how about that other old man?"

"What other owld man?"

"In the Lowest Dungeon."

"No owld man in there. Nobody is ever kept there for more than a night. It's just handy to the chopping block."

"But there was an old man in there with me."

The dwarf looked at Morgan sideways. "You must have been seeing things!"

"Um . . ." said Morgan and continued on.

After several more twists of the staircase, Morgan and Stoolput came to another door. This one was different from the rest of the prison doors. Instead of being made of iron bars and straps, it was no more than thick wooden slabs bolted together with bands of iron running across from the hinges.

"On the other side of this door," whispered Stoolput, "is the shift foreman's office. Maybe we can get out through here. He's got another door leading to the hall." The dwarf put a finger up to his big lips and listened at the keyhole.

"Is the shift foreman in there now?"

"It's hard to tell. I can't hear a thing."

"Do you think I should open it?"

"We can't lose much more than our heads . . ."

So Morgan slid the goss-glove through the metal-plating as quietly as he could and then peeked through the hole. A candle burning on a desk made him wince with its brightness. "I can't see anybody in there," Morgan whispered over his shoulder. "Nothing but applecores and logbooks."

But even as he said that, a deep growl escaped from the glove-sized hole. The light from the candle shivered and flickered.

"Owld Nozwurt's asleep!" said Stoolput triumphantly. "I always wondered what those shift foremen did all night shut up in their offices."

"Should we try to get through?"

"Sure," grinned the dwarf, "I've always wanted to see what kind of an office these shift foremen have."

With the lock gone, the door yielded easily under Stoolput's pressure. Into the office crept Morgan and the dwarf.

"Ooooooh, would you look at that fine owld piece of clockery!" exclaimed Stoolput. "My, but Nozwurt has a fine taste! And that paper-weight, a toad all done up in peanut butter! Isn't that clever? Oooh, and the ice-box!"

Instead of gawking around at the shift foreman's treasures, Morgan was on the lookout for danger. He peeked behind the desk and stopped short. "Oop!" he squeaked. "There's someone in here all right!"

A pair of thick boots protruded from behind the desk and attached to them was a slumbering form lying in a heap on a leather couch.

"Aye, that's Nozwurt, the rat! He's the one that sent me down for sleeping on juty." But instead of scowling as Morgan expected him to do, Stoolput snickered so loudly that he had to put both hands over his mouth. "Snurk!" he snorted. "Oooooh, this is too precious!"

"Stop giggling," whispered Morgan. "You might wake him up!"

"I don't care. Let him wake up if he wants to."

"Let's get out of here!"

"All right."

Stoolput started after Morgan, but as he was so busy giggling, he crashed into the corner of the desk and sent the prize paperweight smashing into fragments upon the floor.

"Hunh?" grunted the sleeper. "Wha's goan on?"

The shift foreman sat up. He slid his hat back on top of his head, then scrabbled for his glasses on the desk. Jamming them on so that one of the legs went under instead of over his ear, old Nozwurt blinked once, then twice at Morgan and Stoolput.

"Gaolbreakers!" he exclaimed. "I'll fix you!" Yanking at a string that dangled from the ceiling, the grizzled old shift foreman sent up an enormous jangle of bells.

"It's time we left, shitska!" shouted Stoolput to Morgan.

Morgan was edging out the door as his fellow escapee picked up the entire desk and held it above the old dwarf tugging at the alarm.

Crash!

The desk smashed down with such a force that the legs of the couch buckled and splintered. "Sleep that one off," Stoolput laughed, "you owld buzzer!" And he ran out into the hall after Morgan.

Morgan was halfway down the darkened hallway, heading towards a stairwell when Stoolput's voice boomed out, "Not that way, shitska! The barracks are down there!" And sure enough, a company of dwarfs could be heard clanking up the stairs from out of the castle's clammy depths.

Skidding to a halt, Morgan hastily turned himself around. He rushed back to Stoolput who was heading towards the blackness at the other end of the hall. But that stairway as well filled up with dwarf-guards, armed to the teeth with swords and shields.

"Quick in there, shitska!" urged Stoolput. "Into the courtroom!"

The dwarf shoved Morgan down a third hallway that joined the main one at right angles. Rushing past a highly-polished wooden door, the two escapees slammed it shut upon the pursuing guards.

Morgan suddenly found himself in the largest and brightest room that he had ever seen. White pillars lining either side of the room held up a lofty ceiling, higher than the tallest tree on the island. This magnificent hall was lit by thousands of firebrands in groups of three, forking upwards at an angle from brass holders on each pillar.

Echoes, violent echoes, reverberated from one end of the empty courtroom to the other as the dwarf-guards hammered and chopped with broadswords and axes upon the door that Stoolput was trying to hold shut. The clamour in the castle was spreading like wildfire from room to room.

"Opit up! Opit up!" bellowed dwarf voices on the other side of the door. "Opit up or we'll break the door down!"

And another voice boomed out, "Send a party through the main door!"

"See that door beside the throne, shitska?" hollered Stoolput over his shoulder. "Run to it. I'll be with you in a moment and show you where you want to go!"

Morgan ran out into the middle of the court like a tiny marmot under a hostile white sky. Reaching the red velvet carpet that extended the length of the grand room, the small boy dashed up towards the throne.

On a broad dais five steps high sat the Great White Throne of Tilantes. Morgan had heard it celebrated in song, but he had never seen it until this troubled moment. Larger than the largest armchair, it was carved from the finest marble to be found on the island. The stone was almost transparent because of its purity, white because of its depth, and flecked within by chips and slivers of gold. And on the wall behind the Great White Throne stretched the Skull and Wingbones, horrible in red, white and black.

At the base of the dais lay two beautiful fountains to either side of the red carpet. Their foundations were made of the same fine marble, and the waters they sprayed high into the air were glimmering rainbows.

Rushing between them and skipping up the stairs to the throne, Morgan headed straight for the door Stoolput had indicated. As he reached the door, Morgan looked back to see his friend rushing across the middle of the court with a pack of dwarfs in hot pursuit.

"Go on ahead," shouted Stoolput to Morgan. "I've a score or two to settle up first!"

But Morgan only stood in the archway watching. Before his eyes, Stoolput was struck on the temple by a shield and knocked down upon the steps. A cloud of dwarfs fell upon his body and kicked and hacked at it

unmercifully. Elbowing each other out of the way, the guards all struggled to get in at least one good swipe at the escaped prisoner. The last Morgan saw of his friend Stoolput was him sinking under the press, punching and kicking all those that came near.

"I better get out of here," thought Morgan to himself, "before they come after me." Leaving his post, he headed for the doorway at the end of this new hall.

"Where's the shitska?" cried out one of the dwarfs.

"A shitska in the castle!" exclaimed another.

"An escaped prisoner!"

"The shitska either went thataway or thataway! Split up and spread out!"

Behind him Morgan heard the clatter of armour fast approaching. The hallway floor trembled beneath his feet. "Oh, I'll never make it!" he puffed. "Oh, but here's a way!"

A small darkened doorway presented itself to Morgan, branching from the larger and well-lit passageway. He ducked into the room and closed the door.

"Down this hall!" shouted an iron throat.

"The shitska's not far off now!"

"It's probably headed for the rear balcony!"

"After it!"

Morgan heard the dwarfs in all their frightening splendour rush past his doorway and lumber on down the hall to wherever it led. Breathing a sigh of temporary relief, he took the time to glance around. The

dimly lit room seemed to be a storage for the royal musical instruments. Dusty black cases shaped like violins, tubas and harps were stacked all around the walls and some, upon an old piano in the shadows.

The opposite wall from where Morgan was crouched held another doorway leading to a stairway. But it was barred. "Maybe that's the way Stoolput meant," he thought. "I best find out. Those dwarfs will soon be looking in here when they can't find me on the balcony."

Morgan, who was growing quite adept at opening doors with the goss glove, let himself by the barrier and then reclosed it. As an afterthought, he pinched each of the three hinges into a solid mass of metal. "That should hold them for awhile," smiled the boy to himself and trotted quietly up the stairs.

The stairway, which was rather short, led up into a well-lit circular room with no windows. At the far side of the room was yet another doorway, heavily barricaded by a monstrous steel door made fast by no less than seven laminated padlocks. And upon the stoop in front of this door sat a roly poly black-nosed dwarf with a hand upon each knee.

"What make you here?" challenged the dwarf, flushing bright green. He cheerfully leapt to his feet and drew out his well-polished broadsword. "At last, at last, an invader! Answer the challenge!"

Morgan simply stared. As thick as he was high, this puffball of flesh and ugliness began waddling over in his direction. The dwarf stopped in the middle of the room and attempted a heroic pose. "My name

is Tyger Brightbyrn; my task's to guard the door. I'm so short that I can't learn, but my feet reach to the floor!"

And with that, the squat dwarf drew up his sword in such a menacing manner that Morgan fell back a pace. Tyger Brightbyrn's eyes remained clouded and steady as he advanced upon the boy. "No one but one gets past Tyger B. Brightbyrn. And that one is Lindenbane himself. He gives me a cigar every time he enters the High Tower, the Stronghold of the Crown Jewels and the Impregnabobble Fortress. You're a shitska and didn't even bring me a cigar!" Each statement brought Tyger one waddle closer to Morgan. This guard of sorts swished his sword about his head as his nose grew bulgier and blacker.

"Oh my goodness," exclaimed Morgan. "I wonder if I have time to get down to the iron gate and open it up again. I really shouldn't have sealed it up so tightly."

As Morgan backed down the stairs one step at a time, a loud roar of dwarf-warriors jangled into the storeroom and began banging on the gate with their swords.

"Opit up there, Tyger!"

"Hey, I spy the shitska!"

"Do it to it, Tyger! Go to!"

"This damb yett is all closed up!"

"Bung her opit!"

"The pinanno, the pinanno, use the pinanno!"

Tyger Brightbyrn was inching down the steps after Morgan while below, a storeroomful of angry dwarf warriors was busily breaking in the bars that lay between death and their shitska. Morgan was quite surrounded.

The squeak of piano rollers wobbling faster and faster rose to a squeal, then a splintering crash. The big box smashed against the bars and succeeded in springing several off their weld. A reverberating echo of piano strings lingered in the air.

"Again!" shouted a dwarf captain.

And with singleminded force, the piano once more battered against the gate. This time, a few more bars pried loose and the entire frame of the door twisted under the blow.

"And again!"

Smunch! "It's mine, you guys!" shouted Tyger, jamming his thumb into his meaty breast. "You always get to kull the shitskas! It's my turn!" And so Tyger, struggling all the harder to reach Morgan before his friends managed to break through the iron gate, wedged himself all the tighter between the two walls of the staircase.

"One more time!"

SCHMASH! BYANG! DANG!

The gate crashed inward against the stone wall, bounced off and with a ringing clatter, fell upon the steps.

"HURROO!"

"Let's gut it! Let's gut it!"

"Graurwl!"

Over the roar and the hubbub, Tyger was screaming, "It's mine, you dwarfs! It's mine!" And he brought his sword whistling down upon the upstretched arm of the wide-eyed Morgan.

Scrank! Tyger Brightbyrn's sword splintered into highly polished pieces upon the goss-glove, and showered down upon the dwarfs bounding up the stairs. A few fell back clawing their eyes. "My sword!" cried the fat dwarf. "My beautiful sword!" And as Tyger was weeping over the hilt of his broken sword, Morgan fell to his knees and, scrambling between Tyger's two fat legs, escaped up the stairs behind him.

"Gerrout the way, Tyger!"

"You feckless tubbalard!"

"Argh! He's claught fast!"

"Push!"

"Pull!"

Morgan gained a few precious seconds as the army of dwarfs swore and strained at their chubby comrade. With the goss-glove, he fell to plucking off the padlocks, one by one, from their sturdy hasps. After the seventh had hit the floor behind him, Morgan twisted and tugged on the handle, but the door did not budge.

"What gives?" he wailed. "I took off the seven locks!"

A loud cheer from the dwarfs shook the base of the tower. "We're through! We're through!" They had finally succeeded in raising Tyger high enough off the stairs so that they could carry on the chase. Sus-

pended in the air like a balloon, Tyger squealed piggishly, still pinched by the two walls. Dwarf after dwarf jostled under him and barrelled up the stairs into the round room.

In a blind frenzy, Morgan began punching and hacking holes in the thick steel door, but only at the last second did he spy a small keyhole hidden under one of the ragged hasps that had been bent when its padlock was torn off. Plunging his whole hand in the lock, Morgan twisted the goss-glove to withdraw the final bolt that held the massive door closed within its jamb. And with one turn of the handle, he was in.

He slammed the door full in the face of a slaving dwarf and held it shut by plunging the goss-glove through the metal doorjamb and the edge of the door itself. But still he was not safe. A huge hairy hand shot through one of the largest fist-holes and brushed against Morgan's leg.

"Arrgh! I felt it! I felt it!" screamed the dwarf. "Just wait 'til I get my hands on it!"

Morgan kicked away the greedy fingers that were lunging in and out of every nook and cranny, but this only caused a heavily tarred firebrand to come fuming and crackling through the hole. And arrows and crossbow bolts whistled in at all angles, kicking up a stinging spray of stone flecks wherever they happened to hit.

Morgan's eyes darted about in the cloud of pitchy smoke and flying chips and more than once came to fall upon an iron bar, bolt-up-

right in the corner. "Maybe I could put that in front of the hole and stop the arrows from flying in," he thought. "Or else I'm going to get hurt in a minute!" So he stretched out and gripped the bar in his left hand. Pulling it towards him, Morgan soon discovered that it was bolted to the wall at the bottom and would only swing back and forth parallel to the door. So lowering it to the level of the largest fist-hole, he held it in place with one knee.

"That's keeping out the . . . Ouch!"

Some dwarf on the other side must have rammed the butt end of his iron pike against the iron bar because an electric shock exploded within Morgan's kneecap. He let slip the bar and, before his eyes, it fell neatly into place between the small flanges at the base of the door and the doorjamb.

"So that's what the bar was there for!" marvelled Morgan as he rubbed his knee. "I wonder if Arthur would have known, just by looking, that it was there all the time to lock the door?"

And with a smile blushing from ear to ear, he withdrew the goss-glove from its holding place and limped up the spiral staircase step by step to leave the foulmouthed dwarfs battering and raging at the immense door which was now lodged firmer than ever in their path.

from the high tower to the catacombs

The High Tower stood out nobly against the quickening rose glow of dawn. Ash dull parapets, turrets and bartizans clustered around its base and formed night's last stronghold against the relentless rush of morning.

Winter-fed clouds, kindly filtering the first light's glare, trailed across the cobalt sky. Wound-dank waves, hurling themselves upon the ocean-rocks of the rugged shoreline, shattered into brief flashes of rose water and came frothing down as creamy foam.

The rhythm of the waves kept aloft the minnowing seagulls, creeping and crawling on their wind-tipped wings.

And through a scarcely perceptible slit in the stonework, Morgan, starved for sleep, rested on a wide step and gazed at the wonder of the awakening day. All else had ceased for him, save the sea-birds that dipped and soared in the warming air before his eyes.

But soon a tickle of smoke in his nostrils brought him rudely back to the problem of escaping from the dwarfs, the dwarfs who were at that very minute huddling and scheming around the heavy door that kept them out of the castle's strongest keep, the High Tower.

"Smoke?" asked Morgan of his sleepy self. "Smoke? In here? Is the tower afire?"

The fair-haired and battered boy turned his eyes down into the gloom of the twisting staircase and beheld billows of black smoke creep-

ing up the passageway, filling every niche and cranny with its eye-burning pungence.

"They'll never burn the tower down," said Morgan to reassure himself, "because it's made of masonry six feet thick!"

But as the peppery smell of burning rubber and urine-damped chicken feathers curled around his nose, Morgan understood the intention of the dwarfs. They were going to smoke him out.

The air grew thicker and Morgan coughed until he felt like vomiting. "Oog! What a stink! I'll have to get out of here!" Despite the stiffness of his joints, Morgan groaned to his feet and teetered back and forth. He did not feel much like moving, but he knew that breathing would be impossible in a matter of short minutes. Below him the smoke grew blacker and blacker, blotting out the daylight from the slit windows that marked every fifteenth step in the tower.

"I wonder," worried Morgan, "if the smoke will reach up to the top?"

His heavy boots carried him painfully up the remainder of the steps to an opening that led to a dimly lit room. Carved into the broad stone lintel above the door was an ancient inscription:

Smoke, wind and waters
Pass not by my door;
Only flesh of fathers
Can enter to explore.

"I wonder what that's all about?" said Morgan and passed through into a small, circular room, the highest room in the castle.

The air was blessedly free of the stench. It was scented instead with the heady, but pleasant fumes that were wafting out of a huge, three-legged black pot which sat dead in the centre of the room. Oddly enough the pot bubbled fiercely and smoked away with no trace of a fire under it.

And all around the room, shaded by amethyst-beaded curtains and bottle-green blinds, were bushels and bushels of jewels and tons of precious metals. There were sapphires, emeralds and rubies basketed here and there among the shining armour plate. Blue flashing diamonds as large as hens' eggs lay scattered loose on the floor. Suits of armour, crowns, swords, sceptres, pikes, maces and stilettoes were heaped against the walls. Gold doubloons and silver pieces spilled from moldering wooden chests and sparkled with the light the gems seemed to be radiating.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Morgan, his eyes staggering around the room. "What a roomful of treasure!"

Then the wispy smoke above the pot divided like curtains to reveal a naked skull grinning down at Morgan, its eyes burning and dancing like red fire. Above, upside down on the stone wall, a parabolic halo hovered eerily.

The sight froze Morgan's trouble-grimed hand over his mouth. "Oh my gosh!" he uttered breathlessly. "What a fright that was! It's only an old skull with its top cut off and a candle stuck inside, but it sure did scare me for a minute."

Although Morgan knew that the skull was completely lifeless, he was nonetheless undecided as to the flicker in its bone-jar eyes.

Perched atop a dusty obsidian pillar, they seemed to laugh down at him.

"Those dwarfs certainly are grisly beasts, making lanterns out of people's heads!" thought Morgan. "Speaking of dwarfs, I wonder how they're coming along down there at the door?"

Turning around to listen, Morgan was confronted by cloud upon cloud of black smoke. It was the smudge that the dwarfs had sent up the stairs to drive their shitska out onto their swords. It somehow did not pass under the lintel, but remained outside on the stairway like a storm behind glass.

"It must be magic!" said Morgan at last. He dipped the gossyglove into the black smoke and caused the tiny tempest to whirl around and flee before his paddling fingers. "This whole tower is magic, I bet! I can just feel it all around me."

And so Morgan left the doorway and walked slowly around the room, taking care to keep a good distance from the bubbling pot in the centre of the room. He picked up the first bejewelled scabbard that he came to and examined it closely, marvelling at its fine texture. Setting it aside, he scooped up handfuls of golden coins and let them trickle through his fingers.

"I wonder if I should take a pocketful or two?" he mused. "No!" he decided. "This isn't mine for the taking. It's private property!" He tossed down the gold and moved on to admire the gems. But all the while he felt the fiery stare of the cracked skull on the nape of his neck.

Finally he found himself out of riches to fondle. He was standing in front of the obsidian pillar, gazing up at the skull. With a high mad flame in its eye and a demonic grin from earhole to earhole, it gazed back into Morgan's eyes and seemed more than it was.

Then, as if a breath of air had rushed in from an opened window, the candle flickered high and then low and then high again. The patch of light behind it on the wall leaped and fell with the flame and caused the darkness to either side to flap heavily up and down like large wings.

The skull seemed to be flying, flying directly at Morgan.

"That's silly!" his voice quavered. "A skull can't fly!" But despite Morgan's words, the dark wings lofted the skull on high. There above, hovering upon the blackness of the room, grinned the skull whitely.

And as it arched like a hawk the moment before stooping, Morgan fell back screaming "Aggh! It is flying!" The goss glove proved useless against the wings of blackness which beat against his eyes.

In a panic Morgan thrust himself stumbling backwards until he collided with something large and solid. A popping and burbling beside his ear told him it was the pot in the centre of the room. He was about to leap forward to escape the scalding heat, but he discovered that the big black pot was actually cool, very cool.

And what's more, the skull settled back down onto its pillar as quickly as it had erupted into flight and its candle continued to burn with an unwinking gleam.

"Heavens," sighed Morgan, dusting himself off. "This really is an odd place, this High Tower! Doorways that keep out smoke, flying skulls and cauldrons that boil when they're cold. What's a body to think?" Morgan fell to inspecting the mysterious pot. Peering into its mouth, he could see nothing other than its bottom curving up to the rim. He thrust the goss-glove in and felt around. There was nothing but the pot.

"Hmm! This is unusual! It must be magic!" mumbled Morgan, resting his elbow thoughtfully on the rim. To his amazement he felt the pot tilting over one way. And with the goss-glove, he found he could rock it gently to and fro.

The swaying caused the smoke to froth and gurgle all the more. With the pot's every movement, a huge wave of fumes washed over its side and streamed down its black belly like water in arrested motion. In reaching the floor the smoke would fan slowly out into a billowing flow.

Morgan, watching the smoke roil about his ankles, happened to notice a circular section of the floor giving up and down under the pot.

"Now there's the trouble," he observed. "The floor is wobbly."

He stooped over for a better look. As he pushed the pot further and further over, the crack in the floor gaped wider and wider. Finally the pot, reaching a certain point, took off on its own and toppled over to land with a hollow clank on its side. Misty clouds welled out of its mouth and bathed the floor in knee-deep spuming whiteness.

The pot, now lying dormant on its side, displayed the circular section of floorstone which it had pulled up in the course of its fall. And through the haze loomed a large black hole where the round stone had rested.

"Holy smoke!" marvelled Morgan. "A door! I wonder if it's a secret passage out of the castle? It sure is dark-looking down there . . ."

A ladder of rungs sunken into the masonry disappeared into the obscure distance. Morgan held the gossyglove in, but its glow did not begin to penetrate the black depths.

"I'll need a candle or a lantern," said Morgan, "if I intend on going down there." And he shivered at the thought of returning sightless to the gloomy depths of Tryntor.

Poking here and there amongst the riches and weaponry, he searched for even the humblest candle. But there were none, none except the blood-red wax that burned in the mind of the skull.

"I wonder if I should . . .?"

As he stalled, the flame jumped to brightness and with the increase in light, the skull broadened its smile.

"I don't suppose I can do any harm," whispered Morgan. Then as an afterthought he added, "And I don't think a dead skull could do me any harm . . ."

So Morgan, after weighing his fears on the rusty balance of his mind, stretched to his full length and on tiptoe seized the smooth lantern in his ungloved left hand and brought it down from its lofty perch.

Examining it closely, he found it to be very feeble, only held together by the candlewax inside and the dust of many years that sat on its bony brow.

"I don't know who you are or if you can hear me, but I hope you don't mind. It's just that we . . . or at least, I . . . have to escape from the dwarfs and this seems to be the only way out at the moment . . . other than flying . . . So I hope you don't mind."

At the prospect of going exploring and getting some fresh air, the skull smirked broadly. But that was only the flame flaring at a jostle.

Morgan, scuffing his knees on the stonework, started to climb down the ladder into the hole. An aura of the odd smoke followed him, clinging around his body as the darkness crowded in upon him.

Fortunately, the ladder was not long as Morgan had to carry the skull in one hand and use the other for support. Raising his watchful lantern both high and low, he discovered that he was standing on a scaffold of sturdy rough planks. The stone all around was the same as the inner walls of the staircase leading up to the crown room, but it was unfinished. The poorest faces, bound together by unchipped mortar, faced inwards surrounding Morgan.

Immediately before him awaited a basket, suspended by ropes that wound around a windlass. It dangled over what seemed to be a bottomless pit.

"Now isn't this a clever way out," exclaimed Morgan out loud.

" . . . way out," agreed his echo.

"No one, not even Arthur, I bet, would ever think of going up first to get down."

" . . . get down."

"I suppose this contraption takes one up and down. These gears and levers probably work it."

" . . . work it."

So Morgan set the skull in a small circlet of copper on the inside of the old basket and crawled in himself. The basket, swaying and drifting aimlessly, poised above the drop.

"Now what does what?" Morgan wondered as he stooped over to examine the gears, levers, drums and ropes that formed a formidable mass of machinery. "Which lever do I turn to go down? Or do I pull?"

After several moments of concentrated study, Morgan finally decided that in order to go down, the main rope drum would have to rotate either one way or the other. But when he tried to move the handle one way, it would not budge. And turning it the other way only caused the basket to rise a click at a time.

"Ah hah!" smiled Morgan triumphantly. "I've found the trouble! This little bit of metal is the catch. It's stopping the gear from moving the other way."

So with no more effort than a light flick of the goss glove's forefinger, Morgan broke off the troublesome rider.

Jang! sang the windlass. Rang! Bang! Yang!

The basket dropped out from under him and Morgan plummeted after it.

Clickety-clackety-clackety . . . The handle in front of Morgan's face screamed crazily around in circles, promising soon to fly off its nut.

"Yow-w-w-w-w-w-w. . .!"

Clackety-clackety-clackety . . .

Lurching wildly this way and that, Morgan came within a hair's breadth of mashing against the rough walls, disintegrating with the wicker basket into a thousand dust-like pieces.

Unbeknownst to Morgan who was hurtling by too fast to notice, brickwork gave way to block, blockwork to cut stone and finally, cut stone to the raw rock of the mountain itself.

Clackety-clackety-clackety-YONK! Yin-yin-yin-yin-yin-yin . .

Halting at the end of its singing rope, the basket brought itself up short with a flattening snap. But Morgan, being heavier than the wicker was strong, continued on through the bottom of the basket and landed smack on his backside against cold rock.

The ruptured basket bounced about like a yo-yo gone mad. Flashing and tangling, its ropes leapt to and fro as the timberwork at the top creaked and groaned in complaint. Above, the tiny circle of light winked shut with a distant thump and all suddenly became darkness.

As Morgan gasped for breath, he noticed a feeble ray of light flicker from the skull which was quite a distance away and lying on its side. The guttering wick, hissing and spitting at the red candle wax, struggled to keep alight.

"Oooog!" groaned Morgan as soon as he was able. "Oooogle!"

And without even feeling for possible broken bones, he crawled off on all fours towards the dying candlelight.

He set it upright and watched the flame gradually assert itself against the dripping wax. In the light of all the sudden activity and adventure, the skull grinned even broader than before.

"Ooof! What a drop! I suppose I did something wrong with that little bit of metal. But as they say, there's no use crying over spilt tears. The wise thing now would be to find a way out of here." So Morgan hoisted himself up and held the lantern high.

He found himself standing where the tower's gullet opened up into a shadowy underground cavern. A multitude of smaller tunnels led every which way into darkling nooks and crevices. Their damp walls glistened in the new light. And like the walls, the floor swelled and dropped in wave-worn folds. Pools melted away into the various darknesses deep within the belly of the earth.

Water, slowly dripping from the ceiling into one of the pools, marked time while distant wind-whispers filled the breathing and listening silence. Wave ripples tripped into the still water waiting here and there in puddles each time the slightest sound--a drip, a footfall or a creak--shook the heavy air.

As Morgan made his way between pools into the central cavern, his boots sent up a brimming thud that surrounded him completely. Following the largest of the tunnels, the skull-bearing boy pressed onward, stopping only to look and listen into each shadow. Hearing nothing

but his own breathing, he would then continue to follow the smooth curves of the walls as they wound along. Then off to his right and left, he spied row upon row of black holes.

"That's funny," he muttered. "What could they be?"

He peeked into one and spied a slimy green upsidedown face. His heart almost stopped. But then he realized the face was only clay. With the help of the smirking skull, he saw the whole body, covered head to foot in smooth clay, stretching into the hole's darkness.

"This must be the royal burial vault!" murmured Morgan, full of awe. He drew back and, keeping close to the tunnel's centre, he left that section as quickly as possible.

Presently he came upon what seemed to be a branch route. But only after he had turned into it, he realized that it was just a sizeable dead-end and nothing more.

He was about to leave when a glint from the shadows tugged at his eye. Holding the lantern so it would direct more light, Morgan caught his breath as his eyes fell upon a sleepy transparent pearl on a dull metal tripod.

"Is that the . . .? Is that the . . . rain-orb?" Morgan finally brought himself to gasp.

And in response to the thought, a gleam awoke in its centre and swirled slowly outwards. The dim rocky closet, the keep of the world-pebble, broke out into pastels as the glimmering grew and grew into brilliance. A storm of the purest colors unfolded before Morgan's eyes and cast out vibrations, both felt and seen.

Setting down the skull-lantern, the boy just stood and stared, joyful in the presence of the rain-orb. "What a light!" he sighed. His pains and troubles drifted off into forgetfulness. "What a dazzling light!"

The deeper he gazed into the ball, the more exotic and fascinating became its colorful shades, tinges and glows. All the tints and hues that Morgan had once known to quicken life itself, now seemed like pale imitations. Diamond flashes, once so breath-takingly beautiful, seemed like nothing.

Travelling past one shimmering and gliding layer, Morgan's gaze met another one even more exciting. It swirled around, swallowing him entirely. Morgan felt himself melting into the rippling underwater rainbow, dissolving and laughing.

"Ooooooooohahahaha!" chuckled Morgan, half-sighing. "This is keen! I'd be happy to look at this forever!"

But then a stray thought struck him. "How is this getting me away from the dwarfs?"

"Ahhhh, the dwarfs can't find me here . . .," he smiled dreamily in reply.

"But they can find me!" he shouted aloud to his wandering mind.

"You don't care about me like I do!"

"Ahhh, and you don't care about me like you care about yourself . . ."

And then, a distant trumpet blast echoed through the stony passage.

"Listen to that!" shouted Morgan. "Dwarts!"

"Ahhh, that was great, truly great . . . I could stay here and listen to music forever . . . Those brassy blaers driving into my bone marrow . . ."

"Well, I want to get out of here and I want to go now!"

"Um," sighed the Morgan that was enjoying the vision of the rain-orb. "is there anything else you want before you go?"

"Yes, I want the rain-orb!"

So Morgan, struggling with himself and the various temptations, grabbed up the rain-orb, imprisoned it in both hands and held it triumphantly over his head.

"Hah! I won!"

"No no, don't touch . . ." drifted Morgan's other voice palely down the passages. "Don't ever touch . . ."

A silence fell upon the cavern.

He forced his mind against the caress of the rain-orb and sighed with relief when he discovered that the marvel of the colors had ceased to exercise such a power over him. There was no other voice to answer now. The orb just tingled with clear receptivity upon his fingertips.

"Now I can get down to business. With the rain-orb in my possession, I no longer fear Lindenbane. He won't be able to blind me with lightning storms or change me into a toad!"

This new confidence welling within him, Morgan rushed off down the passage looking here and there for an opening, door or sign of escape. The rain-orb, quietly throbbing out light, replaced the skull

candle, left flickering behind in the partial tunnel.

The major passageway eventually broke up into two smaller ones and the one he chose, the rightmost, soon branched off into three.

"Hmm!" remarked Morgan and stopped. "I can't just go rushing off helter skelter. I'll have to make a plan. Since I chose the right one this last time. I'll just keep on taking the right turn whenever I have to make a choice." And off into the right passage he ran, quite happy with his new plan of action.

But soon at the end of that passage, he had four from which to choose. Remembering, he again chose the right one. "Perhaps the right passage is the right one to take," he laughed to himself. And the more he thought about it, the more he came to feel that he was doing the right thing.

"Right is right!" he shouted and continued merrily on, splashing and singing. And sure enough, each time he entered the right passage, the roar of the surf increased in volume. The very thought of the sea drove him on.

But finally after he had chosen the rightmost of five passageways, Morgan became exhausted with all the exertion. Today had been a busy day with all the running up and down of stairs, the escaping and the like. Even though he could feel the moisture in the air and taste the salt spray on his lips, he had to sit down and take a rest.

"I'm almost out," he thought to himself. "and it's a wise thing to rest now. I'll need all the strength I can get my hands on after I

get out into the open." So he looked around for a place to sit down.

To keep from getting wet he chose a high and almost dry indentation in the wall, practically a passageway in itself, and sat down with a sigh.

"Oh boy! Not much further now! Just wait until I get my wind back! I'll follow the shoreline until I get back to the Black Forest and then I'll find Gobble and we'll beat the dwarfs for sure with the rain-orb and the dwarf-getters!"

And just when Morgan felt most certain of rushing through the next passageway and bursting out upon a sunny winter morning, his eyes fell upon a dull metal ringlet standing quietly on three metal legs.

He had seen this sight before. It was so familiar.

Then on the dank stone beside the sweating and panting boy sat the lantern-skull, now extinguished and dark.

"No no no no noooo!" he screamed and tore his hair. "I've been here before! This is where I found the rain-orb. I've been travelling in circles!" The skull merely grinned up at him.

Morgan jumped up and ran out into the major passageway. He looked up and down and sure enough, it was all the same, the same place as before.

"Oh my goodness! All that running! And for nothing!" wailed Morgan.

But all of a sudden he brightened up. "But that's what I get for always choosing the path to the right. I'll choose the middle one each

time, or the closest one to the middle as the case may be, and be sure of going in a straight line!"

And off he dashed first down the left passageway and into the middle one, then into the right of centre and again through the middle tunnel until he was positive that he was travelling directly towards the sea.

But to his complete dismay, the next time he sat down to rest he looked up to see the dull metal tripod sitting there, and at its feet, the skull smiling malignantly up at him.

"Oh boohooohooohooohoo!" he cried. "This is just terrible! I'll never get out of here. I'll just die of starvation and waste away. No more chicken drumsticks and plum puddings! Waah!" And all of a sudden Morgan jumped to his feet, seized up the skull and sent it shattering against the far wall. "You trapped me!" he screamed at the shards of bone.

Heartily discouraged and most decidedly disconsolate, Morgan slumped down into a puddle that covered the middle of the passageway and just sat there crying. He was even denied the final pleasure of beating his fist into the rock. The goss glove moved effortlessly through the cavern floor to leave gaping holes that filled immediately with water.

"Oh I wish wish wish that I could find the way out of here!" sobbed Morgan. "I don't want to die here. I'm so young and beautiful!"

And in response to his first introductory wish, a flute-like whisper stole throughout the passageways and calmed the false sea-roar.

A magic silence hung in the air. In the still puddle water between his legs, Morgan saw a glorious reflection: the heartening warmth of torch-light at the end of a long and well-like passage.

"A reflection reflects," thought Morgan, remembering his brief schooling. He looked straight up, something that he had never thought to do before, and gazed up and up, up at a distant light at the end of a most magnificent and towering tunnel.

"Hurray! The rain-orb answered my wish! I've found the way out!" he shouted joyfully. Then he sobered up. "But how am I ever going to get up there? I can't fly!"

But before Morgan could dwell on that dismal fact, the sound of the surf swelled in his ears. This was really the sea roaring! The very ground shook the walls all around and the puddles in the underground cavern shivered away their mirroring clearness.

From out of the two passages, a blue-black torrent of water burst into the main tunnel, frothing white against the walls. And from the other direction rushed a wide wave as tall as the cavern itself to bear down on Morgan as well. He clutched the rain-orb tightly with the goss glove and awaited the pulverizing shock.

But nothing of the sort occurred. Instead Morgan found himself floating above the clashing foaming wavefronts. He did not even get wet. The spray only damped his shirt-tails and flecked his hands and face.

Up and up the vertical tunnel floated Morgan. The rain-orb seemed to be borne or repelled by the watery onrush, and it in turn lifted

him skywards. It was not a pulling force that needed a tight grip, but rather a gentle weightlessness. He felt as though he were floating in the saltiest of waters.

Craning his neck back, Morgan looked upwards to see what was coming. "It looks pretty good from here," he said to himself. But as he got closer to the top of the tunnel, he spied an iron grid barring him from the torchlight. His stomach leapt into his throat, and as it was about to sink again in despair, Morgan suddenly remembered! "The goss-glove! I have the goss-glove!" he shouted ecstatically. "I'll pulverize that yett, as the dwarfs call them! I'm sick and tired of those criss-crossed bars popping up in front of me wherever I go!"

And so when he drew near, Morgan shifted the rain-orb to his left hand and prepared to smack the iron gate with all the passion he could muster. He waited for a second until he floated closer, and then a moment more until his blond hair came to press against the iron . . .

BLAP!

The one blow of the goss-glove was so mighty that it not only severed a way through the iron bars, but bent them curving back upon themselves.

And Morgan, the rain-orb in one hand and the goss-glove on the other, floated through the curved space, the newly-opened entrance to the light, and found himself settling down upon the solid marble floor of the royal courtroom, lit by ten thousand flaring torches and guarded by a thousand of the biggest and ugliest of Lindenbane's gruesome dwarfs.

On the high marble throne sat Lindenbane himself, wallowing in splendor. He sat up amazed at Morgan standing there with the rain-orb. His bauble in the hands of a ragged boy who, by all rights, should have been at that time trapped in the High Tower gradually smoking to death!

But no one was more amazed than Morgan. Like a new calf he simply stared all around, his mouth wide open.

The courtroom! The dwarfs! Lindenbane!

And awaiting judgment on the velvet carpet before the throne, and guarded on either side by two husky dwarfs shining in magnificent golden armour, stood Arthur stripped naked to a gleaming silver girdle.

Long black tresses of unbound hair tumbled down over Arthur's frail, ivory shoulders and played about the wondrous pink nipples tipping the small swellings of soft flesh that graced the young prisoner's chest.

"Arthur!"

"Morgan! How nice to see you again!"

"But . . . but . . . but, Arthur, you're a . . . girl!"

And while Lindenbane fumed and a thousand of his most murderous dwarfs unbuckled their hilt-thongs, Arthur smiled with a blushing softness never before seen on that fine face and replied, "Well, in that case, you must call me Artha . . ."

the rain-orb speaks

High above the courtroom on his Great White Throne sat Lindenbane smouldering and gnashing his teeth on unutterable oaths. Under his wilting glare stood Morgan, knee-deep in sea-water spewn forth from the new fountain.

"A shitska!" remarked one dwarf, breaking the spell of surprise.

"It flushed owt of the cowl'd air register!" yelled another.

"Now how could it come to do that when it's up in the tower?" asked a third.

"Stop your infernal morbling," barked Lindenbane, "and grab that shitska!" So with an unhesitating rattle, a thousand dwarf-guards splashed out into the flooded courtroom to fulfil their king's command.

"Oh Morgan! Watch out!" cried Artha and clasped her bare hands to her bosom. Morgan whirled around in a full circle to find that he was surrounded on every side but one. And that one side was no better than a dead-end as it was the head of the courtroom where Lindenbane was sitting. But it was in that direction that Morgan began to run.

The fair-haired lad, with the rain-orb under his left arm and the goss-glove straight-arming before him, charged headlong towards the nearer of the two marble fountains, the only possible goal in sight.

"GRAURWWLLLLL!" rasped a thousand dwarf throats.

"Go, Morgan, go! Go go go!" cheered Artha at the top of her lungs. She jumped up and down clapping her hands.

Never before in his life had Morgan run so fast or so well. But with his heart hammering and the dwarfs outflanking his right, he neither felt as trim nor as swift as a gazelle. For all his effort and accomplishment, he was nonetheless forced out into the centre of the courtroom towards the opposite advance of dwarfs, bristling with broad-swords.

Morgan ran this way, then that, flailing the goss-glove before him. Dwarfswords that strayed too close were broken off at the hilt or else smacked singing to the floor.

But, armed as he was with the goss-glove and the rain-orb, Morgan soon found himself cut off every which way by a ring of dwarfs as thick as a prison wall. It seemed his running days were over. Silence, save the trickle and the bubble of the rising water, filled the courtroom. Every eye fixed upon Morgan as the dwarfs drew in and prepared for the kill.

But to the amazement of all, Morgan floated free of the tightening trap. The rain-orb under his arm, seeming to reduce his weight to less than nothing, lifted him aloft and out of reach. A few dwarf hands snatched at his heels.

"Hoooong!" the court gasped.

Morgan rode the rain-orb up and up towards the wide white arch of the ceiling and sailed far above the ugly upturned faces.

"Ooh! I'm flying!" exclaimed Morgan to himself. "How nice!"

"Hurray for Morgan!" piped up a thin voice against the bass roar of the dwarfs. Looking down past the radiant spray of the first fountain, Morgan could see Artha cheering wildly in the midst of the hostile crowd.

"Opit all the doors! Let the warter owt!" commanded Lindenbane above the swelling din of his troops. "The rain-orb is repulsed by oddinary warter, so the Crummies opit all the doors and the Gummies shovel owt all the warter! And the Bogies, you nirk the shitska with drats!"

The dwarfs fell immediately into some sort of order. One party of dwarfs ran to the doors and pulled them open against the rising waters; others grabbed up brooms and shovels and began sweeping and scraping the water out, while others yet tried to stem the gushing tide by damming up the cold air vent with rugs.

But the dwarfs who worried Morgan the most were the Bogies, who had put away their broadswords in favour of their crossbows.

Siff!

Saff!

Dwart bolts whistled by Morgan like angry bees. Here and there and close at hand, they splatted into the ceiling to send powdery clouds of plaster chips and chunks fishtailing down upon Morgan and the dwarfs alike.

Flitting from one corner of the courtroom to the next, Morgan succeeded in making a poor target for the Bogies far below. By wiggling his arms this way and that, he found that he could swoop and soar at

will. And when a dwarf-bolt happened to fly too close, he would simply snatch it out of the air with the goss-glove. "It's a lucky thing that I'm good at catching flies," thought Morgan as he snagged another one. "But I'm going to have to get out of here! I could easily break through the roof or one of the shuttered windows, but I can't just leave Arthur . . . er, Artha . . . down there with all those dwarfs. There's no telling what they might do to her. . . ."

And as Morgan chewed over that particular dilemma, he felt his supporting pillow gently give way beneath him. The courtroom floor was quickly draining of sea-water. Down and down he drifted in a one-way spiral. Each turn drew him closer to the rainbow fountain. The floor tilted first on one side, then on the other and swirled around and around and around.

"Oook! I'm sinking!" squeaked Morgan in alarm. With all his might, he tried to stay aloft, but he felt himself being drawn back to earth despite his best efforts. The invisible balloon beneath him was deflating, deflating slowly and surely.

"HAR HAR HAR!" chortled the dwarfs most horribly.

They crowded together grinning and tried to guess just where Morgan would land. The cumbersome body of dwarfs edged this way and that around the fountain as the boy spun gradually earthward.

"Stay up there!" pleaded Artha. "Stay up, puh-lease! Flap your arms or something, only stay up there!" But Artha only provided the dwarfs with more cruel fun. They laughed louder and regaled.

Morgan flapped his arms as hard as he was able, but to no avail. Down and down, relentlessly downward, he sank. All that he could effect now were small swoops, just bits of a dive followed by shallow and inefficient recoveries. Seeing that their shitska's flying powers were on the wane, the dwarfs rejoiced all the more.

"Keep the shitska away from that fountain!" bellowed an overpowering voice that Morgan recognized as Lindenbane's. "That fountain holds the first water! Keep the rain-egg away from it at all cost!"

A violent spasm of understanding shook Morgan in its grip as the rain-orb continued on its very obvious course of zeroing in on the sky water. "Oh no," gasped Morgan. "The first water! The sky water! I can't let that happen!" As his legs dipped into the multicolored spray, Morgan hid the rain-orb under his jacket to protect it.

The skywater, seeping through his thin and ragged trousers, penetrated his legs from his skin all the way through to his bone marrow. Neither warming or chilling was the sensation, purely invigorating. Morgan's muscles drained of all their weariness and formed distinct parts of a co-ordinated whole--himself--and tightened ready for anything. Soon enough their final test was to come.

Morgan, touching weightlessly down on the fountain's highest peak like a diver upon a hostile ocean floor, bounded briefly skyward one more time. But slowly, slowly he came drifting down into the knee-deep pool of first water. A myriad of grabbing dwarf-fingers besieged him.

"Zagbaster, quit pushing, you bastard! It's mine!"

"Hee hee hee. Only if you beat me to it!"

"It's mine!

"Snuffle snurkle snort!"

Morgan slashed viciously at all the greedy advances that the dwarfs made. "You let me alone . . . you . . . you bunch of dwarfs!"

Red dwarf blood from the goss-glove-inflicted wounds splashed into the pool and exploded gradually into a red haze that came to hang evenly in the skywater.

"Holl still, you squirming turdlet!" growled one dwarf between his teeth.

"Spike it!"

"Put the sword to it!"

"I'll gut it!" declared another dwarf and jumped into the pool behind Morgan.

Elsewhere, outside the clamouring ring of dwarfs, Artha looked on with horror. To her right and left, the two spear-bearers guarded their little prisoner instead of joining the fray. Nevertheless, they watched with interest. Fingering their golden spears in their meaty hands, these two dwarfs swallowed and shook with restrained excitement.

Artha, bending over as suddenly as a spark, gripped the base of the spear to her left and wheeled it in an arc towards the ceiling. As a natural consequence of this, the razor-sharp spearhead swung in the opposite direction, pivoting around the guard's right hand, to bury itself in his eyeball.

"Eeeeyyaurrrgh!" shrieked the dwarf.

"Take that, you bastard!" cried Artha joyfully as she wrenched the golden weapon free of the half-blinded guard. And in the twinkling of an eye, she had driven the self-same spearpoint once and twice into the sockets of the other dwarf. "Here I come, Morgan!" screamed Artha. "Ready or nuts!" With that, she charged the imposing wall of backsides with her spear.

"Oooooagggawwh!" gurgled one victim of Artha's rage.

Artha twisted the base of the spear in a wide oval about her head and brought another dwarf squirming to the courtroom floor. Plucking the spear out of his ruptured rectum, she jumped over his body and waded further into the press. "I'm coming, Morgan! Keep a stiff upper lip!"

Dwarf after dwarf quietly retired from the scrabble to buckle at the knees and pant painfully underfoot upon the blood and water dampened floor.

Meanwhile back in the fountain Morgan found the fight cut short as one of the dwarfs crept up behind and hoisted him upside down by the seat of the pants.

"HURROO!"

"We've got the shitska!"

"Gut it! Gut it!"

"Neh neh neh, get the rain-egg first!"

"Hurroo! Hurroo!"

Morgan squirmed, but it helped him little. Hundreds of stubby fingers probed under his clothing, ripped the jacket from his back and tore at his pants. All Morgan could do was grip the rain-orb all the tighter and hope for the best.

"Hee hee hee, I'll muck the shitska doff it!" giggled one leather-faced dwarf who stepped forward. Two thick fingers pinched Morgan's nostrils shut and the heel of a foul-smelling hand sealed off his mouth. "I'll muck it doff it!"

"Hah hah har!" laughed the dwarfs.

"Owld Zagbaster'll do the trick!"

"Ho ho ho!"

Morgan could not breathe! The huge ham promised to smother him within the minute. Although panic was upon him, Morgan did not drop the rain-orb. Now and again through the jungle of arms and legs, his fear-widened eyes glimpsed the crimson-tinged rainbow water in the pool below his head.

Another voice made itself heard above the gleeful hubbub of the dwarfs. "I'll muck the shitska part with its precious rain-egg!"

Morgan felt his legs forced apart and the seams of his trousers giving way thread by thread. Two strong hands gripped him by both legs.

"AH HAR!"

"Chesturd's got the right idea!"

"Padooze it, Ches! Padooze it!"

Faintness threw itself upon Morgan's brow when he felt cold fingers take up his hairless testicles and squeeze them one after the other to the smoothing end of his scrotum. He saw, to his horror, a dwarf hand lower to the thick belt before his eyes and slowly withdraw a small cutting knife from its copper-edged leather sheath.

"Ikk!" Morgan forced out under Zagbaster's palm. "I'll fig you zwartz!"

And so Morgan thrust the rain-orb from his breast into the awaiting depths of the twinkling skywater.

"Vvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvv . . . !"

A high-pitched vibration froze the blade in the air and the joyful expression on every spectator's face. It stayed all that moved and breathed.

Lindenbane, who had been standing on tiptoes to observe the crowning stroke, collapsed backwards into the fold of the Great White Throne. He cried out in an old man's cracking voice, "No no no, my children, no no! Agggh! . . . it is done!" Drained of all its color, the dwarf king's face underwent a series of clonic contortions. The skin tightened on his bones and came to crack in its dryness.

BARROOOOOOOOOOOOMTTTTTTTTT!

A thundersmash flattened all that was standing. The courtroom's shuttered windows burst inward with a blast of wind that was so forceful that it threatened to demolish whatever was so foolish as to remain in its way.

Outside the castle walls the happy blue of the morning sky darkened into a profound purple and then a bottomless black, only to be broken by the world-high bolts of lightning that danced and crackled across its ancient face.

Morgan opened his eyes to realize that he was lying sprawled across Artha's warm body amongst a sweating jumble of arms and legs. He had been flung all the way across the courtroom from the fountain which was now quite alive pulsing with eye-searing white light and energy.

"Ooooooh," groaned Artha under Morgan's weight. "What happened? What did you do?"

"The rain-orb . . ." Morgan started to say, but he could not finish.

Beneath them, the castle floor was shifting like sugarcubes glued to a moaning blanket. Massive ceiling stones hurtled down all around them, exploding into fragments upon the floor. The towering white pillars on both sides of the crumbling courtroom swayed heavily to and fro promising to teeter too far the next time or the time after next . . .

"Let's cut on out of here!" screamed Artha in Morgan's ear. "Before the ceiling gives way completely!"

The two children leapt to their feet just in time to see the white-bearded Lindenbane throw his hoary arms outwards in a final spasm. Underneath his skeleton, flaky with remnants of skin, the throne split and splintered into tiny fingers of marble. Empty-eyed and lifeless, Lindenbane, the dwarf king of almost five days, tumbled forward weighed down by his velvet robes onto his rotting face. He dissolved into dust in a matter of seconds.

Before Morgan and Artha's confounded eyes a wind gusted up to scatter the dust and threads over the dais and roll the neglected golden crown over the edge of the highest step.

Bonkety-tonkey bonk gonk!

So high only the moment before, the crown bounced hollowly down the steps to come rolling to a stop at Artha's pink-painted toenails.

Wind, rain and hail stormed in the windows of the courtroom. A shutter ripped off and clattered end over end across the floor among the panic-stricken dwarfs until it tumbled over flat on its side.

Artha bent down and scooped up the crown. She put it around her wrist like an oversized bracelet and grabbed Morgan by the sleeve to hurry him towards the main door at the opposite end of the courtroom. "Quick!" she urged. "There's no time to waste!"

But before the pair of them could scamper half a length towards the main door, a rushing wave of black sea-water came pouring in before them, carrying with it the polished oaken doors, the sturdy doorframe and part of the stone wall.

And at that same moment the pillars began to give way. The ceiling, in blocks and curved sections, came cascading down upon the dwarf-covered floor. One pillar heaved over and with earth-shaking force, sheared off its capital against the floor. At least twenty dwarfs perished under that single stroke.

"We'll never make it that way!" shouted Artha above the roar of the storm. She yanked Morgan about and led him back towards the shattered throne.

"The sea is rising!" exclaimed Morgan.

Vanguards of spray flung themselves through the courtroom windows and were soon followed by a heavy sweep of cold salt water.

"That door up there," bawled Morgan, "leads to the High Tower!"

"Right you are!" Artha shouted back. "But I want a spear first!"

She picked up a golden spear and the two were off, galloping up the steps of the dais, out the back door and along the hall.

The dwarfs paid no heed to Morgan and Artha, or for that matter, to each other. They ran everywhere in aimless horror, smashing into courtroom walls, tripping over each other as they tried to find some niche or crevice beyond the reach of the ravaging storm.

"The staurm'll neht tetch us behind the thick walls!" shouted one white-faced dwarf.

"Aye, we're safe as houses in Iryntowr!" responded another, but his face belied his words. "The staurm'll soon blow over. Up like a lion, out like a lamb, they say!"

"And that's the truth!"

But this storm was not destined to blow over. The tempest outside the castle's walls screamed into a hurricane. The wind-whipped waves lashed against the dwarf-carved blocks of Iryntor. Whole wings and battlements were swept away in the flood with no more ado than if the tide had risen to erase a childish construction of sand, cigarboxes and dreams.

Morgan beckoned with his finger. "Come on through here."

Artha followed him through the darkened musical storeroom and up the flight of stairs. Within the space of a dozen heartbeats they had arrived in the windowless circular room. At their heels followed the crash and rumble of destruction.

Tyger Bryghtbyrn was hunched over and feeding a small fire at the base of the steel-barred entrance to the tower when Morgan and Artha arrived. "Ooook, it's the shitska! Two shitskas!" he shrieked and fell back against the trembling wall. "Don't hurt poor Tyger! Keep those fists of yours away from poor Tyger!"

Whether it was necessary or not, Artha moved Tyger at spear-point further along the wall. "Open the door, Morgan!" she ordered over her shoulder and then turned to frown again at the poor shivering dwarf.

Within a blink of an eye, Morgan kicked the heap of smouldering chairs and violins away from the door and rammed the gossaglove through the thick door's bottom. He slashed up and down until he was certain that he had severed the iron bar that held the door tight and fast.

"Where did you come across the gossaglove?" asked Artha.

"An old man gave it to me."

"Wow!"

One pull of the handle swung the door open and the two creatures scurried hand in hand up the staircase to seek the refuge of the crown room.

"Gee! This is one place in the castle I've never been before!" said Artha. "My father never let me come up here!"

"Your father?" asked Morgan between puffs.

"King John, silly! I'm Princess Artha, your bloody sister!"

She twisted the gold band around on her ring finger to reveal the linden ensign and pushed it up to Morgan's nose. Despite the crash and thunder of the storm without, Morgan stopped dead in his tracks and spluttered, "My sister! Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"You never asked me, dodo!" answered Artha as she went tripping up the stairs ahead of Morgan. "Anyway I thought you knew . . ."

"Know? I didn't know!"

A wave crashed against one of the tower's slit windows and sent a spray of cold water up and down the full length of Morgan. Never bothering to wipe away the drops of salt water from around his eyes, he shrugged his shoulders and followed his sister's gently swivelling hips up the stairs. She ran faster and faster until she was no longer in sight.

But there she was waiting for him at the top. Huffing and puffing, Morgan rushed past her and through the door to the nearest window to see how the tumult was faring. Drawing aside the beaded curtains and poking his head under the blind, he peered into the fearsome black storm. The whole tower swayed and shook under the deafening windblast.

"Come on, Artha! Take a look! What a storm!"

A lightning bolt split the dark sky so wide open that Morgan could see for miles. In the distance rose a frozen shadow capped and streaked with white froth.

The blackness returned with a thunderclap.

Another flash of lightning then fell upon the sea to reveal the monster wave, top out of sight, bearing down upon the tower.

"Oh watch . . ." Morgan started to scream, but the gigantic wave broke upon the tower. The watery blast shot through the glass windows as if they had never been there before, and swept Morgan backwards against the opposite wall with head-bonking fury.

Under the wash, the iron pot burst forth into a dazzling display of fireworks. Its mouth, once the portal of smoke, now issued bubbling flames and splashing sparks.

"Artha?" asked Morgan as soon as he was able to draw breath.

"Artha! Where are you?"

Morgan looked feverishly around but the room was vacant except for himself. He ran to the window. "Artha! Artha!" he shrieked into the storm. "Don't tell me you were washed out the window?"

Morgan's cry was answered by a high wail in the blackness.

"Vvvvvvibgyorrrrrrrr!"

The cry was at once faint, distant and pervasive. It sounded like a toothless old crone flinging not a curse, but a hysterical cackle against the storm.

"Artha? Is that you?" Morgan blubbered. "Is that you, Artha?"

"Vvviibbbgggyyooooooooorrrrrrrr . . .!"

Clutching the window-frame in both hands, Morgan wept as he looked out into the nightlike Wednesday morning. The hurricane whipped such

whitecaps out of the rising tide that he was unable to distinguish between the wind and the wave. His hair blew straight back and the lightning flashes revealed the pallor of his face.

"Artha! You can't leave me!"

"I haven't, dummy!" came a voice from the doorway. "Just help me get through this idiot door!"

Morgan spun around to see Artha framed in the doorway. She was pressing against some invisible shield that kept her out and pounded with both fists on whatever it was.

"It must be the magic verse!" thought Morgan. But when he said so, the wind blew his words away.

"What?" shouted Artha. Her body whitened where she pressed it against the glasslike barrier. "How am I supposed to get through? The water is rising!"

"It's magic!" shouted Morgan at the top of his lungs. "That's what's keeping you out!"

"I don't care! Get me through!"

The level of the water in the spiral stairway had long since risen past the highest slit window. Black and foreboding, the sea water rocked calmly back and forth in the tunnel and lapped at Artha's thighs.

Leaving the relatively dry floor of the crown room, Morgan splashed into the stairway and tried to shove Artha through the magic doorway.

"Ouch! Quit pushing! I've already tried it myself, thank you!"

"There must be something else we can do!"

"Well, hurry up and do it! This water is freezing my bum off!"

"Aha! I've got it!" shouted Morgan triumphantly. "I've finally thought of something all by myself!"

"What is it?"

Artha stood shivering on tiptoe with the brackish water splashing against her breasts.

Instead of answering, Morgan turned to the centre wall and began hacking at the masonry with the gossaglove.

"What are you doing?"

SPLOOOSH!

A torrent of water tumbled out of the hole that Morgan had chopped in the wall. It buried both the children in its chilling rush.

"Spoot! Kaff kack koff," spluttered Artha. "What is it?"

"Here," coughed Morgan, "you swim through the hole and head for the trapdoor at the top. I'll run inside and open it up."

Artha threw the spear through the door into the crown room.

"This had better work, boy!" she said. And without a word more, she dived into the swirling tide and disappeared.

Rushing back into the crown room, Morgan heaved back the spitting smudge pot with the gossaglove and peered down into the murky deep. There was nothing but water, nothing at all. There was no Artha.

But then a tickle of tiny bubbles excited the surface and a slice of white flashed in the gloominess below. Spooting and laughing, Artha broke through the troubled surface.

"Wow!" she yelled. "I got lost down there! Under some sort of platform! What a gas!"

Lending Artha his hand, Morgan helped her out of the hole in the middle of the floor and stood protectively over her. She sat dangling her feet in the welling water and chattered as she wiped her wet hair back with her fingers. Each time the lightning exploded across the skies, Morgan beheld Artha in a new position, busily attending to herself, encrusted in the wax-clusters of wetness.

One more time a mammoth wave drove unheralded against the High Tower. It washed through the seven portals of the crown room carrying gems, coins, arms and treasure in its wake. Likewise, Morgan and Artha were battered against the blockwork.

The children, sprawled separately against the leeward wall, felt the floor shift under them. The pull of gravity slid them towards the lower side of the room. And what gems and spears were not already washed away rolled and hopped alongside down into the awaiting puddle.

"What in the world is going on?" demanded Artha.

"It's the end of the world . . ." explained Morgan.

"The what?"

"The end of the world!"

"I believe it! This High Tower feels none too safe!"

"I threw the rain-orb into the first water!"

"Then it is the end of the world!"

"That's what I said."

"You threw the rain-orb into the first water!"

Morgan looked sheepish. "The sea is rising higher," he grinned. The floor of the crown room was now completely submerged. "I don't know what we'll do if it rises any higher."

Artha said nothing. She merely floated as best she could on the back of the shifting water. Staring into the wooden rafters of the tapering tower, she let her body move to and fro as the forces cared to rock it. Then propping herself up on her elbow, she turned to Morgan and said, "You know, I think that if we crawl up there under the eaves, we can ride out the storm."

Morgan looked up at the rafters and frowned. The distance between sea and ceiling levels was rapidly diminishing. "Well . . .," he drawled out after a pensive pause, "I suppose we'd be a bit higher than we are now . . . But only about three feet. I can't really see how that would help us lick the problem in the long run."

"No, I don't mean just to hide under the roof and hope that the sea isn't going to rise any higher. Like it is! And I also know that this tower isn't going to hold up much longer! Even a dodo could tell that!"

And as testimony to Artha's words, the stone tower lurched over with a sickening twist into even more of a precarious position.

"Well, what do you mean, Artha," asked Morgan, struggling to keep his head above water.

"I mean that we'll ride in the roof like a boat! If we can chop off the wood from the stone base, the whole roof, being pointy and having a metal flagpole, should tip over with little effort and sail upside down. And we'll be in it." Artha looked upon Morgan's perplexity with

Long since smothered under the black sackcloth of hair, the sun plummeted towards the quaking centre of creation, flanked loyally by falling stars and a blood red moon.

"I might say . . . I might say . . .," murmured Morgan. "My goodness, what have we done?"

"We?" Artha asked. "I didn't throw the rain-orb into the sky-water! You did!" Then after a pause she added, "But it really doesn't make any difference now . . ."

Under their hands and feet, the rafters shuddered like a foundering boat.

The sea rose into such a high rampaging wall that the magnificent High Tower, the pride of Man, Dwarf and Fair Tilantes, was lost forever under the rush.

In its place stood nothing save the froth and spume of destruction.

And the lightning bolts fell down upon the ragged shards of earthdom in such rapidly accelerating order that the master waves blinked forward in their mad rush towards no known or unknown shore.

Finally the intervals betwixt the bolts became so insignificant that the sky was one continuing lightning flash, so unearthly bright that Morgan and Artha, wherever they were, lost all contact with their world.

Murky greens and blues gradually gave way to dusty oranges and reds . . .

part two:

(Bubble, bubble)

Over stubble

In the fields he hopping went.

(Giggle, giggle)

Small toads squiggle

Where he leapt all happy-spent.

(Sunny, sunny)

Flowed the honey

Joy. He flopped in clover scent.

Elaine Verbicky

"Burblings"

the voyage

Out of the stillness yawned the sea, broad as it was black.

An only thunderstorm set silver flashes upon the horizon to divide the rich purple of the waveless sea from the purple richness of the starless heavens. And as thunderstorms do not last forever, this storm, sole remnant of the maelstrom that had swallowed the world, stumbled into the mute distance upon its spout until it eventually tripped and fell apart.

And as if the still point of destruction's pendulum had been reached and surpassed, the sea's imagination stirred within its darkest depths and with the serenity of timelessness, came to conjure up a hint of light playing here and there in the vast oceans of darkness. The glowing ribbons made their way thence to the sea's surface in tiny bubbles, each of which came to burst and cast skyward a single pinpoint of stardust.

As the glow on the sea-bottom grew, more and more of the bubbles rose and ruptured until sparkle-droves set the sea's back to tingling. A fog of luminescence gathered to hover in shifting clouds above the newborn waves.

As the waves rose higher, the wind awoke and carried the starry sea-cover aloft. There an ever-changing pattern formed. Ribbons of stardust flocked together and raced across the expanses above. These illusive and isolated regions shone brilliant-white against the greater part of the purple and black profundity.

Gradually the swirling masses of dust particles compacted into gleaming pinpoints and in the night sky the stars were born. The firmament waxed alive with these new formations describing huge arcs across its face. They exploded, faded away and reappeared in turn. Two stars, spinning drunkenly about each other, pinwheeled elliptically across the sky while another group of three revolved soberly about some imagined common centre in the void. Like each of its semblances, every star danced and lost itself in the fleeing dustlike distance.

Whole constellations swung slowly about on great invisible axes and in swinging, twisted old faces into new: a fat cat became a flat hat. And the sea's face echoed the spectacle on high, but each wave rearranged the heavens as it rippled along.

Then, in some as yet unnamed direction, the horizon began to swell, shot through with fire. The watery arc tugged at the flat horizon all around until a bluish-green veil of light flashed heavensward from beyond the beyond and vanished into the night air as suddenly as it appeared. Out of the water burst a golden orb blazing like the sun. It vaulted across the sky, bathing the sea in light and banishing the stars behind the soft blue of a summer day.

"Wow!" exclaimed a breathless voice. "Morgan, did you see that?"

Artha turned away from the unfolding cosmos and looked down upon her brother. Morgan was curled fast asleep in a puddle of water washing about at the bottom of their bobbing roof-boat. He was reduced to no more than a ragged white shirt and a pair of trousers so full of gaping holes

and split seams that, were he awake, he would have been able to enjoy the warm sea air to the fullest extent.

"Morgan! Wake up! You're missing everything!"

"Hunh?"

"I said wake up, you sleepy-head. You're missing everything."

"Wazzat?"

"Oh, shut up! Go back to sleep!"

Scooping up a handful of water, Artha splashed it down on Morgan's face. The blond boy jumped, grunted once or twice and then sat up rubbing his eyes.

"You just missed the sun coming up and the stars before that!"

"Doesn't the sun come up every morning?" asked Morgan absently. He stretched and yawned some more. "Oooog, did I have a good sleep! All my aches and pains are gone. And my shoulder's all better! Boy, I'm hungry. I haven't eaten for ages . . . Hey! I thought the world was destroyed and we were drowned for sure!"

"Well, we weren't, were we?"

"I guess not . . . as we're still here. Whereabouts are we?"

"Why don't you come up here and see for yourself? It's a great Wednesday morning again, that is if it's Wednesday . . ."

So pulling himself through the rafters and crawling from one wall support to the next, Morgan made his way up to the edge of the roof-boat where his sister Artha was hanging on.

"Oooh my," gasped Morgan. "What a sea! So wide! There's not a landfall in sight. Nothing but water in every direction!" And as he

turned about to check out the truth of his observations, Morgan clapped his hand over his mouth and pointed to the sky at Artha's back. "Take a look at that!"

"Wow! A rainbow!"

"I've never seen one as big and bright as that one before!"

With the sun baking warmly on their naked backs, the two children beheld the most wondrous of rainbows, a semi-circular arch of fluorescence sitting squarely upon the horizon. From warm-red at the top to chilling-violet at the bottom, the various bands melted one into the other and shimmered like a wall of falling raindrops.

The arc widened slowly as it crept higher and higher in the sky. Finally its glorious legs came to stand at opposite ends of the sea, straddling the children in the roof-boat.

"Wow! I've never been under a rainbow before!"

"Me neither!"

And at the exact moment when Morgan and Artha passed into the realm beyond the rainbow, a complex image of pilasters, towers, castles, ships and buildings loomed out of the blue-skied distance and looked down upon them. Neither of the children dared to speak, turn away from the beautiful distortion or even blink.

A fan of featherlike beams radiated out from behind the pure white castle, the most dominant piece of architecture, and stretched all the way across the sky to meet the rainbow, now a halo bounding the sun. The sun was now far behind the roof-boat which rose and fell with every swell in the middle of an unbordered sea.

A gust of wind arose and blew the sight away: all that remained of the castle was empty sky.

Leaping out of the wave crests that the breeze whipped into spray, a myriad of marine rainbows clustered close to the roof-boat and played before it as it drifted slowly in the same direction as the lemon sun was rising.

Without a word, Morgan and Artha watched the wonder of the sea until the sun warmed through their bodies and made them appreciate the refreshing breeze.

"I'm going to get a bit of a suntan while there's nothing much to see," said Artha. She stretched herself out crossways over the rafters. "Tell me if anything comes up."

Morgan too stopped staring into the distance. He turned around and looked for a sunning spot. Artha had taken up most of the room across the rafters, so he contented himself by sprawling along the slanting bottom of the roof-boat. His gaze could only fall upon Artha's slim body draped decorously over the two-by-fours.

"I don't have the goss glove anymore," he said finally.

"It must have fallen off in the storm."

"My shoes are gone too . . ."

"You don't seem to need them at the moment."

Artha never bothered to move her head as she spoke: she lay quietly with her arms outstretched and her eyes closed against the sun. As she breathed, her breasts, drawn almost flat against her chest,

heaved gently up and down. From her silver girdle hung ruffling tatters of white silk that scarcely covered the downy blond hair on her thighs.

After a lengthy pause, Morgan let his breath out.

"Don't you think you should cover up a bit?"

"Why?"

"Umm, well . . . you might get sunburned . . ."

"I don't burn."

"You might catch a chill."

"Are you crazy? In this heat?"

"Well, you never can tell."

Artha flipped up a slice of her skirt.

"This is all I've got. Either it covers me here or it covers me elsewhere. Take your choice!"

"I could lend you my shirt."

"Keep your shirt on. Girls look better naked than boys do."

"Um."

As Morgan seemed content just to leave the conversation where it fell, Artha wriggled around a bit and quickly dozed off.

"Well," mused Morgan to himself, "there's nothing much else to do, so I really can't avoid thinking. The air is so bright and warm that I feel all sunny inside. In fact, this is the best I've felt for many a day! Ever since the weekend . . ."

"I guess Old John, my woodcutter stepfather, should be happy now, wherever he is. I brought those dwarts to Justice . . . or sort

of . . . I did get rid of them . . . although I hadn't really planned on it . . ."

And as Morgan's mind drifted from memory to memory-- the linden trees, Mary, Gobble, the townspeople, Old Tom, Stoolput and all the others--he realized that bringing the dwarfs to Justice had a few and rather unexpected side-effects: everyone was dead. Only Artha and himself had made it through the world-storm.

In spite of the happy blue sky up above, a private cloud of darkness descended upon Morgan's brow. He did not feel sunny inside anymore.

"Well," he finally admitted to himself. "I certainly botched that one up. There's no two ways about it: I'm pretty dumb and that's that! But I can tell you right now that I'm not going to let it happen again! I'm going to think twice before I ever do anything important again . . . that is, of course, if we ever reach shore . . ."

And with that firm resolution in mind, Morgan allowed himself to slip off into a bit of a snooze.

When Morgan and Artha awoke, the angle of the sun indicated that it was nearing mid-afternoon. All the bilge in the bottom of the roof-boat had long-since evaporated and the wooden walls and rafters were almost too hot to touch.

Both Morgan and Artha had slept restlessly under the baking sun, but a gentle jarring, accompanied by the sound of wooden bonking, had made them open their eyes within a yawn of each other.

"Igg! That sun feels like it's only four miles away!" said Morgan.

"It is hot," agreed Artha. "But I like it hot! I'd rather boil in oil or be tied to stakes in the middle of a desert than be left naked in a snowbank."

"I don't know if I'd go for any of those."

"That's how mother went . . ."

"Mother?"

"Queen Ygena, clot! Your mother too! Froze to death in a snowbank . . ."

"Just like in the song . . ."

"That song is full of shit. She wasn't crazy or heartbroken like it said. She was kicked out of the castle and had no place else to go! 'Drowned herself in the snow', my ass!"

"Kicked out of the castle? Good King John . . . our father, I mean . . . he wouldn't allow that!"

"Not much, he wouldn't! He was the one that did the kicking! King John the Good, wow! Did he have a good press! I could tell you a thing or two about King John the Good. He was always on at me to cut my hair, drop my hems and blah blah blah!"

"But why did he kick . . ."

Gronk!

A violent lurch of the roof-boat interrupted Morgan's query. It sounded like the iron flagpole had struck something solid. The boat,

not yet halfway down into the wave trough, was forced sideways. Its lowered edge bit into the next swell and bathed the two children in the sea's chill.

"Ahhooo!" shrieked Artha. "Just when I was starting to warm up!"

Quickly righting itself, the boat carried on as if nothing had happened. Both brother and sister clambered up to the edge to see what was going on. The entire face of the sea had changed in feature and colour. Instead of being deep and blue, it was a troubled muddy brown. And off to their portside, Morgan and Artha saw some hump-backed clump, covered with green slime and hangings, rise out of the sea like a giant arm.

"A sea-monster!" shouted Morgan. "Get your spear!"

"If that's a sea-monster, then we're surrounded by them."

Whipping his head around in all directions, Morgan beheld a multitude of similar forms looming out of the muddied waters, obscuring the horizon.

"They're trees!" shouted Artha when she caught sight of a piece of dull brown bark under the slimy heap of greenery that they had seen first. "The water's going down . . . and these are the sea-bottom trees."

"Gee, for a minute it sure looked like a monster coming out of the deep to eat us up. It seems like a whole forest is rising up under us."

"The water is going down, bumhead. Who ever heard of land rising? Use your noodle. Can't you see the mountains in the distance

being uncovered by the water?"

Morgan furrowed his brow and gazed into the distance. There, sure enough, were hazy blue hints of moustaches swelling on the horizon.

"I said it just seemed like it!"

Just then a scraping of wood on wood crawled up the outside of the roof-boat. The boat tilted precariously over to one side until it fell free and slid over to make way for whatever it was that was pushing its way up through the seawater. It was a tree.

"Wow!" exclaimed Artha. "Are these trees ever big!"

"Yessir, I've never seen trees as big as this in the Timberwold. And I know my trees."

"What kind are they?"

Morgan was silent for a minute. He shook his head.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like them in my life."

"Hey! Take a look at that one!"

Artha pointed to a large tree that stood between them and the sun. As the water crept down its trunk, uncovering it to the air, the tree's girth expanded steadily until the treetrunk was as thick as a house. In every direction similar trees soared to towering heights. The little boat shrunk into their shadows and the temperature grew fractionally cooler. Everywhere steam bubbled out of the water. The day's brilliant clarity began to mist over.

"This is some place," murmured an awe-stricken Morgan. "This is the world of wood, I bet. The old man told me about this. He said that after the world of water, which we were living in, came the world of wood."

"I believe it. Look at all the trees."

"He said that it's the best world of all."

"We'll soon see . . ."

And at that moment the roof-boat pressed up under their feet and heaved slightly sideways. The sound of grating gravel carried up the iron flagpole and amplified when it spread out along the wooden surface of the cone.

"We're hitting bottom," Artha said. She peeked over the edge.

"It sounds like it."

And with the leisurely sucking sound that water makes when it rushes down a bathtub drain, the sea spread itself thin over the newly arisen land and vanished into the murky shadows of the humid forest.

The roof-boat, its iron keel buried deep in the soft muck, tumbled over in slow motion and came to rest in a pool of yellowish-brown quicksand. The watery sand gushed through the children's toes and began to snake up and about their naked legs.

"Here," said Artha, sliding the crown off her arm. She held it out above Morgan's head. "I pronounce thee Morgan, Son of John the Good (may his bones crumble in the sands of forget), most noble king of this new found land and all that thou canst survey. I extend to thee the best of fortune's luck, pal. You'll need it!" Smiling, she placed the heavy circle of gold upon Morgan's warm blond hair. "Like I'm not going to carry the spear and the crown, am I?"

"I guess not," said Morgan wistfully. He shook his head and was conscious of the strange new burden. "No . . . I guess that wouldn't be fair."

"Well, your majesty, what's your first august command?"

Morgan looked deeply into her twinkling eyes. "Abandon ship!" he shouted to the skies.

"Women and children first!" screamed Artha.

Giggles threaded their way through the silent swamp and were chased along by swelling belly-laughes. Each of the children gripped a vine dangling loosely from the lowest branch of the nearest giant tree and swung merrily out over the quicksand. They left behind their roof-boat, a relic from another world, to sink out of sight in the loose sand and water that bottomed this new and mysterious jungle landscape.

the new found land

Morgan and Artha were perched side by side on one of the serpentine roots that humped in and out of the swampwater.

For the longest time they watched the empty spot where their roof-boat had gone down and they basked in the sun as it filtered greenly through the foliage. Pockets of air elbowed up through the quicksand like porridge-bubbles and spattered tiny flecks of mud all about when they burst on the soupy surface of the swamp with a wet, farting sound. It was beautiful to watch, but the escaping gas proved foul, almost stomach-turning in its primeval rottenness; and it was this selfsame smell that pervaded the jungle air hanging heavy and motionless on the twisted trees.

"I wonder if this place could ever dry up?" wondered Artha out loud, but mostly to herself. Then she turned to Morgan. "You'd think there'd be less water in the world of wood, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose," answered Morgan. The crown now sat firmly on his brow. "But there is a lot of wood in those big trees. Just look at them!"

"That's true . . ."

"My seat's getting sore."

"Mine too," said Artha. Balancing with her spear, she sought a more comfortable position by shifting this way and that; but she found none. "I think," she suggested, "that we should get out of this section of the swamp. There must be dry land somewhere. Remember we saw mountains when we were still floating on the sea?"

"Those mountains were billions of miles away and I can't see any dry land around here. Not a jot! There's nothing but trees and more trees,

not to mention this gooky stuff!" He kicked up a swath of water overlaying the mud and sent a blanket of droplets sprinkling out into the sweltering jungle.

Artha pulled herself up with a vine and balanced on the arch of the mammoth root. Wiping away the beads of sweat that had formed on her brow, she said to Morgan, "There's no use sitting here like bumps. The roots can do that well enough without our help. So let's take off. We can swing from root to root by these vines, and then from tree to tree."

She strained her eyes into the wandering jungle. "I think there's some grass or something over there. And where there's grass, there's got to be dirt to grow in."

Morgan looked along her finger to a distant point lost in the hectic maze of giant trees. Sure enough, a confusion of shrubbery hung around their dark bases and, in places, crawled up to obscure them. But between that uncertain landfall and the pair on the treeroot lay a foreboding stretch of creepers, bubbles and bottomless muck.

"Okay, Artha. Lead on. I'm right behind you."

Morgan's sister never answered as she was busy wrapping a thick vine around her golden spear. Tugging at the vine, she found that it held. Then with no further ado, she leaped off the root into the air. The vine, reaching down from one of the lowest branches of the tree, carried her in a wide arc towards no particular place that Morgan could descry.

Morgan's stomach was about to fall out when Artha, after wheeling most of the way around the tree, came to alight like an awkward fledgling upon another humpy root on the next tree over. As soon as she was sure

of her footing, she screamed out a cry of victory.

But its echo was buried under a heart-shaking HWONK HWONK HWONK and a frantic flapping of huge wings on water. From behind Artha's tree, a colossal bird ablaze with the brightest shades of scarlet, flame and orange escaped honking and hydroplaning across the swampy wastes. Tilt-ing first this way, then that, it wove its way between the trees and over their roots to seek refuge. Then the jungle fell silent again as the big bird settled down in some secluded spot far from the prying eyes and chatter of the odd white-skinned chimps dressed in filthy rags and leathers.

"Holy crow!" shouted Artha across the void to Morgan. "Did you see that? That bird must have had a wingspan of at least ten feet!"

"I wonder where it came from?" Morgan shouted back.

"It was just behind this tree here . . ." Artha hopped from one root to the next until she was out of sight behind the tree. "Nope!" came a faraway voice. "No more birds here. Not even a nest . . ." Artha reappeared on the other side of the tree, skipping from root to root. "When are you coming over? I can't wait here all day!"

Looking doubtfully at the distance that separated them, Morgan shook his head. "I can't get across there. It's too far."

"You never know 'til you try. Come on! Just grab a vine and swing over."

Morgan tentatively took up a vine in his hand and tugged at it. It felt strong enough, but the strength or the weakness of the vine was not his immediate concern. Vine or no vine, he could not see how he could equal Artha's spectacular feat, even if the distance were only half as far.

"Come on, you scaredy-cat!"

"I'm not afraid! Just because you're over there . . . "

"Then come on over. It's easy. Just jump as far out as you can in that direction and then sort of crawl up the vine. Before you know it, you'll be right beside me on the root here. Don't worry. I'll catch you if you go too far."

"What if I don't go far enough?"

"Just make sure you do!"

Clinging tightly to the vine, Morgan tensed up. After a minute of nervous teetering, he gave his body the command to jump. Nothing happened. His body seemed to object. Again and again Morgan tried to hurl himself out into the void, but each time he started, an electric no froze his flesh to the root.

"Come on," whined Artha. "You're wasting time. It's not that far!"

Then without knowing why or how, Morgan found himself hurtling into the emptiness. Every bone in his body felt hollow; his muscles were no more than water. Around and around spun the jungle; up through his fingers ripped the vine. Then a paralyzing smash on Morgan's tailbone brought everything back into quiet perspective.

"Good boy!" said a voice. "Just hang on a minute."

"Hang on to what a minute?" thought Morgan as the quicksand crowded up around him. It was cool. It wanted him.

With a stabilizing vine in one hand, Artha stooped over to catch at Morgan's shirt collar before it disappeared completely in the muck. Pulling, she met with more resistance than she had counted on. Morgan was heavy

enough without being sucked into the jungle bottom as well. So she eased off, renewing her grip on the vine, and then redoubled her efforts. Slowly, with obscene slurping snorts, Morgan crept inch by inch out of the muck. And after several uncertain moments, Artha succeeded in raising him high enough so he could support himself over a root.

"Ooog," groaned Morgan. He fell to spitting and clearing his throat. "Ack! My mouth is all full of this crap! It tastes like . . . like something pretty terrible, that's what!"

Artha laughed. "That'll teach you to keep your mouth open. Come on, I'll help you up. Oh my, but you're a muddy boy!"

"Thank you," said Morgan, who had just been hauled bodily up onto the root. "I guess I am kind of muddy. But what are you digging your finger-nails into my shoulder for?" He looked up at her face, but the joking expression of the moment before was not there. Her mouth was grim and her eyes, worried.

"What's the matter . . .?" he asked. He looked in the direction Artha was staring, but only saw a few bumps drifting towards them. "That's only an underwater log . . . " he started to say.

Then two of the warty bumps blinked lazily. There was no hint of urgency in the pair of small, green eyes. No rush. As it neared, the muddy log took on the proportions of a slow and careless monster. All the time in the world.

"Quick! Up the vine!" shouted Artha.

At the sight of his sister scrambling up the tree, Morgan lost no time. In a flash he was up there beside her.

Driven by a powerful thrash of its tail, the monster hurtled forward at the last minute, jaws yawning.

NARK!

Morgan and Artha looked dazedly at each other. The root on which they had been standing only the moment before was now nowhere in sight.

"I hope these vines don't break . . ." Morgan squeezed through his lips.

"You and me both, brother!"

Beneath the two children the water-monster slid silently forward, gazing longingly over its wart-ridden shoulder. Its sharply tapering head was as long as Morgan himself; its natural simper was as coy as a cross-cut saw; and its apparent age could be nothing less than ancient.

"I think it's going," whispered Morgan.

"Don't be too sure."

The monster, gradually submerging, proceeded in its quiet course. Eventually the V-shaped waveripples thrown up by its eyes and nostrils rounded a tree and came to rest under a clump of stringy roots. From that shady vantage point the beast watched the tree-children with fatherly concern. "Oh, that rotter!" hissed Artha. "He's just waiting for us to pop into the water. Then he'll eat us for breakfast."

Morgan gulped.

"So don't you take the liberty of missing the next root, Morgan," grinned Artha. "I don't want to explore this new world all by myself."

"I'll try to be more careful . . ."

So down the rough treetrunk the pair of children slid. Taking up

occupancy on a new root, they carefully, very carefully planned their next move. "We'll take shorter jumps," said Artha, "as we can't afford to take chances with our friend Charlie over there. And remember: where there's one, there can be two!"

And so the afternoon passed into evening as Morgan and Artha made their way, braying, bumping and jumping towards their goal---the shrubs that seemed to retreat with the children's every step. Behind them at a precise distance, the cold green eyes of the water-monster blinked in the murky jungle shadows and waited with the patience of a saint.

It was long past suppertime when a tired Artha and an even more tired Morgan crawled onto the welcome firmness of a grassy bank. There they collapsed gasping, heavy with the sticky mud that tainted them from head to toe. The sun had not set yet, but in the jungle night comes upon the traveller much sooner than is expected. Darkness was creeping quietly out of the bogs, stealing unnoticed up the trees.

"Get up, Morgan," commanded Artha wearily. "We'd better find a place to spend the night. I really don't fancy sleeping so close to the swamp. The bugs are bad enough without knowing there are all sorts of weird creatures lurking about out there."

"I'm so pooped. Let's rest a bit first."

In the distance, a shrill cry shook the darkening air---"eeeba eeeba eeeeeba eeeeeba!"---then all the swamp fell mute as a trap.

Morgan jumped up without a second thought. "Let's get out of here," he shivered, "and fast!"

"I'm so glad to have you along, Morgan old boy. You're a real surplus of bravery, you are, you are!"

And with that, the two of them trotted off through the lofty spear-like grass in search of friendlier climes. The going, although difficult, was a breeze compared to the jaunt through the boggy wastes.

Within an hour, they had stumbled upon a path and were walking slowly along it in the direction of the vanished sun, the sun which had set idle eons ago marking the onset of the new world's first and strangest of nights.

"What say we take a break soon?" suggested Morgan mournfully.

"I'm just about dead. My feet are blistery, my back aches, I'm sore and tired all over and I'm hungry to boot! I can't go on much more like this . . . "

"Save your breath," counselled Artha. "You'll need it. We have to find some trees that are suitable for sleeping in. The ones around here are leafy enough to hide in, but their branches are too small to support either of us. Besides, they're hardly high enough."

"Can't we sleep on the ground?"

"Nope! It has to be in a tree . . . a big strong tree!"

So Morgan and Artha shuffled onwards through the new terrain. These trees that lined the twisting path were not actually trees at all, but rather good-sized bushes. Thankfully enough, the straggling pair of children now had solid, dry ground to walk on.

"Now take this tree, for example," said Artha as they came up to

the next bush. With the butt of her golden spear, she prodded the leafy branches apart to reveal the thinness of the limbs. "You couldn't expect . . . YOW!"

Before Morgan's eyes a large green glob of writhing flesh fell upon Artha. She was knocked to the ground.

BONK!

Another knowing weight tumbled out of the tree to land on Morgan's shoulders. The next thing he knew was that he too was sprawled flat on his back across the path. The pathside grass tickled his ears. Two unblinking yellow eyes stared down into his face. They sat like glowing bumps on the mugface of what seemed to be a giant frog.

"Help!" screamed Morgan to no one in particular.

Keeping Morgan's hands firmly pinned to the ground beside his head, the frog shuffled around to strengthen its straddling position. Its thighs and backside were cold as clams on Morgan's stomach. Confounded and frightened by the suddenness of the attack, the boy almost fainted when he inhaled the odor given off by the underside of the giant frog. It reminded him of something dead in a bottle.

"Take that, you ill-mannered beast!" shouted Artha somewhere in the night.

Under his captor's armpit, Morgan saw a frantic dance of legs. There was Artha and another giant frog face to face, attacking and defending in turn. The frog, leaping from side to side on its two rear legs, forced Artha back into the thicket. Half-buried in leaves, Artha braced

her foot against the advancing chest of the enemy and desperately stabbed and jabbed into the flying tangle of froggy hands.

Then, after a successful feint, Artha drove the razor-sharp spear-head into the frog's graying skin, scarcely a finger's breadth from where her foot was braced.

"Wahoo!" she screamed.

Rising on tiptoe, the monster frog tried too late to ward off the blow. Unwillingly it collapsed to one knee, then the other, as it was brought low, still gripping at the golden shaft lodged in its breast.

WHUMP!

All of a sudden Morgan was staring breathlessly into a bright starry sky. The frog on top of him was no longer there. In a fraction of the time it took to gasp in amazement at the sight, Morgan's frog had taken three grand leaps to safety: one on the path, one in the bush and one out of sight.

As Morgan rolled about on the ground trying to recapture a puff or two of air, he saw Artha shaking her bloody spear after the fading crash crash crash in the shrubbery. Then she smiled and came trotting back to Morgan.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she bent over his body.

"I'm fine . . . just winded. Ooog, what a fright that was! Such a horrible animal!"

"Come and take a look at the one I got," yelled Artha, bending over the kill. She prodded it under the arms with the end of her spear.

Morgan stood up and walked shakily over to where the dead frog was

twitching. It was sprawled on its back, one rubbery hand over its chest. Its fingers, skinny and webbed in between, were slightly bulbous at the tips. The blood from the wound flowed over the fingers and down the grayish-white belly. Seemingly amused at the sudden turn of events, the dead frog shone a silly smile at the sky and giggled at the hilarity of rigor mortis.

"Wow!" exclaimed Artha quietly. "Did you see me? What a fright! He jumped on top of me, knocked me down, but I caught him on the chin with the butt on my spear and gained a second there. And when he charged, I was ready. He leaped. I adjusted the angle of my spear and he fell on it! Wow!"

Morgan shook his head. "What an ugly face!" Crinkling up his nose, he turned away.

"Too bad we can't take him with us! He'd make a marvellous trophy!"

"I think it would be a hideous thing to look at . . ."

"That's just the point! The more hideous it is, the better the trophy! Boy, I wish we were back in Tilantes with it. I'd put it up over the fireplace in the Green Room."

"I just wish," said Morgan hugging himself, "that we could see some nice man coming down the path towards us with a lantern and a bucket of peanut butter and banana sandwiches!"

And before Artha could say "Don't be silly!" a flutelike whisper stole over the treetops and lo! There before their eyes appeared a gangling man in midstep coming towards them with a flaming lantern in one hand and a weighty bucket in the other.

"Who goes there?" demanded Artha as she sprang into a stance.

The man stopped dead and put a long, bony hand to his mouth.

"The rain-orb!" gasped Morgan under his breath. "It must have answered my second wish just like it did my first!"

The odd man removed his pointed cap from his head and wonderingly scratched at his rich mop of blond hair. "My word!" he exclaimed, looking from Morgan to Artha and then back again. "I've heard tell of strange sights coming out of the Bog, but this is the first time I've seen one personally!"

Then this new man smiled and nodded his head in the children's direction. "You're mud-men, I suppose? From the Bog, no doubt. Or bog-trotters? Travelling in our land, hey? Welcome to the land of the whorse-pipple! But I must say it's a strange way for you to travel, just appearing in front of a body so!"

Artha eyed the stranger suspiciously. Her spear was still at the ready. "We just appeared? You just appeared! Morgan, my brother there, just wished for you to appear and you did! I saw it!"

Smiling uncomfortably, the man chuckled. "Well now, I should know I've been here all the time. All my life, as a matter of fact. Now it was just this morning that I packed my bucket full of sandwiches and set out for Willow Walk. I come here every month to check on the midnight orchids that grow in these parts. They only bloom when the light of the full moon falls upon them and it's lovely night for this time of yore, isn't it?"

And with that the man trotted past the spearpoint over to a

flower-filled bush. Artha's spear lowered slowly to the ground. She looked at Morgan and shrugged her shoulders.

"Look, mister!" said Artha, tapping the man on the shoulder.

"We're people, not mud-men or bogtrotters! We're just a bit muddy from our voyage from the world of water and I don't care what you say: you just appeared! Can't you get that through your head?"

The man looked over his shoulder and smiled. "You do look very healthy," he nodded. "You're both very big and strong. That's admirable."

Morgan looked at Artha and then at the man. "That's true," he thought. Even Artha, who was skinny as a twig, looked robust beside him. He was about as tall as she, but not so thick. All this while, his fine long fingers were working busily among the head-sized flowers, milking them of some cherry-like berries.

"Take the fruit and leave the flower, heh heh," smiled the man.

"Now let's be reasonable, mister," recommenced Artha. "We've been here longer than this world itself. I myself saw it created! And you were created . . . scarce seconds ago and . . . I don't know . . . and came equipped with a memory so you wouldn't be unduly upset by popping into the world like you did."

The man blushed and his cheeks grew pinker than they were already.

"There's a fine moon out tonight, isn't there? I mean for the season."

"It's the first night we've spent in this world, really . . ."

volunteered Morgan. He then withered under Artha's glare. "Well, what I mean to say is that what Artha says is true; but again, what I say is true too . . ." He paused. "It is hard to figure out."

"Won't you have a sandwich and an orchid plum?" offered the man. "My name is Happy."

"Don't mind if we do!" chorused Morgan and Artha as they dived for the bucket.

"This is the first bite we've had since the last world," said Morgan, unwrapping a sandwich. He bit into its luxuriant white belly and found, happily enough, that it was peanut butter and banana. "Thif if Arfa," he smacked in between bites, "and I'm Morgoom . . ."

"Hello! Hello!" nodded the man.

Artha sat looking at the morsel in her hand. "When you wished, Morgan, you could have ordered ham for me. I don't care that much for peanut butter and banana . . ." But hunger won out and she too fell upon her sandwich and gobbled it down.

"Nice night for a picnic," observed Happy. He took a modest bite from his sandwich. "It's a fine Wetsday night, all in all and all around."

That, plus a few grunts and slurps from Morgan and Artha, was the sum total of the Wetsday evening mealtime conversation.

After the meal, the three friends lay about on the grass. Morgan and Happy burped and rescued the last crumbs in the bucket with the tips of their moistened fingers. Artha, meanwhile, was recreating the battle with the giant frog.

". . . and the monstrous beast stalked me warily while the other one perched upon Morgan and contemplated eating him, its helpless victim alive! As the first frog still was walking free, my hands were tied: I could not rescue Morgan. So I awaited my first opportunity . . ."

Morgan took a bite out of one of the orchid plums. "This is as good as a plum," he thought to himself, "or even better. It doesn't have a seed." He nodded to Happy and Happy nodded back.

". . . the giant frog's eyes narrowed to an evil slit. Then it sprang! I raised the angle of my golden spear and the beast, cunning devil though he was, fell upon it and thereby undid himself . . ."

Happy rummaged around in his shirt pocket until he found a small pouch. He shook it and out rolled two white candies. He and Morgan popped them into their mouths and listened to Artha as they sucked on the cooling peppermints.

". . . then, the other one, seeing the demise of its comrade, leapt off Morgan's belly and bounded out of sight. But I swear, those giant frogs can also walk around on two legs like a man. Just like you and me!"

Happy smiled and looked very interested. "Very nice!" he said and nodded his head. "Very nice!" And when Artha launched into another story about the battle in Headless Valley, Happy listened avidly to that and exclaimed "Very nice!" from time to time.

But halfway through the slaughter of the dwarfs, Happy's polite smile fled before an expression of horror. He flung himself face down upon the grassy ground. A heavy flop flop flop, accompanied by a hissing swish swish swish, struck the air above them.

"Get down, Artha!" Happy shouted. Morgan was already flat on his face beside him. "The vampire! The vampire!"

Falling to one knee, Artha held her spear at the ready and gazed into the starry blackness above. "Ah, there it is!" she smiled and followed the vampire with her finger. Although she could not see the giant

bat itself, she could trace its path by watching the stars wink off and on as it passed. The chopping grew louder and more menacing.

"Get down, Artha! Get like me!"

Happy spread thinly out on the ground for Artha's benefit and covered the back of his neck with his bony hands. "They can't touch you like this," he said. "Once they land on the ground, they can't take off. So if you're like this, they leave you alone!"

But Artha paid no attention to Happy's fears. "Relax," she soothed, "I want to nail the blaggard. I've never killed a vampire before."

The rhythm of huge wings on air ceased suddenly. Morgan, thinking that the danger was over, raised his head in time to see the vampire in all its sable glory fall out of the sky.

BONK!

Artha collapsed upon her side.

Whuff! Whuff! Whuff!

The flying beast lifted itself again into the inky sky.

The hair on the nape of Morgan's neck bristled in memory of the cooling blanket of air hurled down by the vampire's wings. His eyes stung with dust.

"Artha?" he shouted blindly. "Are you all right?"

"Wow!" he heard Artha laugh. "They're game as all get out! He bopped me on the side of the neck before I even knew he was close. But I'll be ready for him the next time!" She grabbed up her spear in both hands and jumped to her feet.

The circling flutter of wings above fell deadly silent a second time.

"Oh, don't try . . ." started Happy, but the bat had already begun its attack. Down down it came swooping.

SKIK!

One more time Morgan heard Artha tumble over.

"Yippee!"

Then a flopping mass of leather and fur jumped upon Morgan, kicked once or twice and bounded off again.

"I just killed me a vampire!" announced Artha. Prostrate amongst the patches of grass and dandelions, Morgan and Happy peeked through their fingers to see a spear-waving Artha dancing and singing over a twisted clump lying a short distance away. Artha's face was shining white in the wash of the full moon. "Come on! Take a look!" she grinned. "Didn't I tell you I was a real something with my golden spear?"

Dusting himself off, Morgan groaned to his feet. "Your neck's bleeding," he said.

"It's just a scratch," she answered. "But take a look at that, would you!"

Morgan and Artha were soon joined by Happy. His mouth twitched from an apologetic grin to lip-biting bewilderment and then twitched rapidly back again. His adam's apple coursed up and down his long throat-front as he crept cautiously up to the corpse.

In reverent silence, they stood in a quiet triangle and looked down upon Artha's latest victory. The vampire resembled a muchly overgrown mouse with dirty silver-gray hair and a leathery black wingspan of not more than six feet. On either side of its foxface sat a large brown eye, fixed

open and frightened. A black puddle, widening in the grass beneath its rib-cage, shimmered in the moonlight with every warm drip. Nothing slowed the steady flow of gut and gore: the vampire's stomach was ripped wide open for all the world to see.

"Well . . .," said Happy at long last, "that certainly is a dead vampire all right."

"And I killed it!" smiled Artha.

"And you killed it . . .," echoed Happy with a cautious smile.

Morgan shuffled his feet and kicked dirt into the pool of blood.

"What say we get to where we're going . . .?" He spied his crown beside the path where it had fallen under the frog attack, picked it up and put it on.

"A very capital idea!" exclaimed Happy, clapping his hands. "A very blossom of an idea! My sailbark's yonder at the Lake. You two can sleep on the floorboards while I sail us home."

"A place to sleep!" murmured Morgan.

"Wow! That's really great," laughed Artha. "You know, Morgan, I'm really glad you wished for old Happy. I really am!"

Like a long-legged bird, Happy hopped from spot to spot picking up the sandwich wrappers that were strewn here and there. He crumpled them up into paperballs and tossed them into his empty bucket.

"Well, follow me!" he sang out as he picked up his bucket and his lantern. "It's not much more than a whistle and a thistle over the brake."

As the little party padded down the twisty nighttime trail, the promise of a lake bettered with the increasing dampness of the air. Crowd-

ing closer to the travellers, the vegetation grew lusher as the path underfoot grew darker. Nightbirds cooed and cawed while the occasional monkey squealed in some faraway tree. Now and then a whiff of clove, aloe or hemlock would tingle a nostril or warm in someone's breast. And the white moon, always above, flitted past the black leafy branches, the dark ferns and palms to lead the travellers on their way.

Soon enough the sky opened up and a vast lake tingling with ghostly diamonds broke into view. In spite of themselves, Morgan and Artha stopped. They found themselves gazing down with wonder upon a lake the size of an inland sea. It stretched so far under the stars that darkness and distance swallowed up its opposite shore. Under the moon the wooded slopes tumbling down to the lakeshore were murk-green. And in a constant march upon the shoreline crystal-white wavecrests, straggling twinily one after the other, washed across the silver beaches: the lapping of the gentle waters enchanted all ears.

Then without a word to dull the moment, the three travellers broke into a spontaneous trot. The path turned and so did they.

"Whoopee!" sang Happy to the moon.

"Yahoo!" answered Artha.

And not far behind ran Morgan. "Woo woo woo woo woo!"

Galloping full tilt along the twisty path that unwound before them, they swooped down across the cliffs of dark-red clay and charged into the lakeside forest waiting in the shadows below.

It was cooler on the beach.

Even Artha, who thrived on heat, found the change of temperature refreshing. Alongside of her, Happy and Morgan sprawled lazily where they had fallen after the mad run down the cliff. Yellow sand blanketed their heaving backs and sweaty flanks. Artha alone was sitting up. She sifted rills of sand through her fingers, building miniature mountains around her knees.

"This new country sure is a lot bigger than where we come from," she remarked thoughtfully. "Tilantes would fit it quite a few times, I would think."

"Ten times!" gasped Morgan between puffs.

"Ten times what we've already seen."

Kicking the sand off her legs, she arose and waded kneedeep into the lake. Splashing her way to the side of Happy's sailbark, as he called it, she rested across its gunwale. The gentle breakers rolled in and Artha, like the transom of the long dugout canoe, welled up and down with the waves. Halfway up on the beach, the dovelike figurehead nodded dreamily in its sleep. The foam washed steadily under the boat, in and around Artha's legs.

"Let's clean up, Morgan," she called over the lapping of the waves. "Or better yet, let's take a swim!"

"A swim!" yelled Happy ecstatically. "Oh boy! I'm so glad I met you pippie. Usually I just crawl into my sailbark and drift home." Happy jumped up and ripped off his shirt, trousers and everything else. Tossing them high into the air, he raced into the lake stark naked and white until the clear water rose to swallow up both him and his rail-thin body.

"Whoopee!" came a joyful scream out of a flurry of white water.

"Come on in, you two. The water's fantastic!"

Without a second's thought Artha slipped out of her silver girdle and splashed deeper and deeper into the lake to join Happy who was swimming around and around in circles. Together they paddled and played, dived and came up laughing, spouting water.

"Come on in, Morgan!" chimed two voices out of the lake. "Don't be such a slowpoke!"

Glancing this way and that, Morgan stepped into the shadow of the dugout canoe and peeled off the remnants of his shirt and pants. Then upon these mudcaked rags, he gently set his crown.

"Wah hah!" he cried and charged the incoming waves.

A vast spray caught fire in the moonlight as his chunky prow hit the cool water. That late evening every ripple and splashlet twinkled gaily.

In the bottom of the bobbing boat Morgan and Artha huddled warmly together under a red and white piece of sailcloth. Resting their heads on their arms, they gazed up at the stars in the deep sky.

"Happy?" asked Artha.

"Huh?"

"What's the name of this world?"

"To us whorsepipple it's the Land of Gore."

"Um . . . What's the name of your king?"

"King?" puzzled Happy. "What's a king?"

"You don't know what a king is?"

"No. Tell me."

"A king is that person in charge of everything. He makes rules, collects taxes, orders everyone about and officiates at bridge-openings."

Happy nodded slowly with comprehension. Then he shook his head.

"No. We don't have one of those."

"You don't have a king?"

"No."

"How about a mayor?"

"No."

"Nor a sheriff?"

"I don't think so."

"Not even a dogcatcher?"

Happy shrugged. "Why would anyone want to catch dogs?"

"Hmm . . ." Artha mused. Then all of a sudden she sat up. "You know what? Morgan can be your king! He's a real king and he's got his own crown. Morgan, wake up! We're talking about you."

When Morgan shook himself awake and opened his eyes, Happy was smiling broadly and talking enthusiastically. ". . . we whorsepipple would be so happy to have Morgan for our king. That's what it is, isn't it? King? He certainly is a nice enough fellow! Wait 'til I tell the others!"

"What's going on here?" mumbled Morgan.

"Be quiet," said Artha. "We're making you king of the Land of Gore. . . Now don't you think it would be a good idea to call the lake, Lake Ygena, after Mother? Is that all right with you, Morgan?"

"It's all right by me, whatever you call it," said Morgan as he tried to snuggle back into the world of sleep. "Call it Lake Artha, if you want."

"What do you think of Lake Ygena, Happy?" said Artha settling back.

"Lake Ygena?" said Happy. He tried it out on his ear. "Lake Ygena. Lake Ygena. Here we are on Lake Ygena." Then he smiled broadly. "Now that is a pretty name for the Lake. Glad you thought of it! I don't really know how we ever got along without the Lake being called Lake Ygena before. Wait 'til I tell the folks back home!"

Artha looked up over the sailcloth blanket to see if Happy was making fun of her, but his smile was so warm and innocent that she believed that he really meant it. Then when Happy started working the craft to windward, she rolled over and whispered in Morgan's drowsing ear. "What do you think of the whorsepipple? As a race, I mean? Like the dwarts are horrible; the dwarfs are clever and people are good."

"They seem very nice. Very polite. At least Happy does."

Sitting at the rear of the dugout all by himself, Happy whistled a low flowing tune into the wind and steered towards a tacking star.

"Anything else?" asked Artha.

"They seem rather elflike. Don't you think so too?"

"Oaflike is more like it," Artha snorted. "They don't even have a king! Can you imagine that?"

"I don't think they're stupid. They're quite nice!"

"I didn't say stupid people couldn't be nice. In fact some of my best friends are absolute deadheads!" And with that, Artha rolled over fiercely, put her cold feet on Morgan's warm legs and fell abruptly asleep.

The waves, lapping on the wooden hull inches away from Morgan's head, rocked him gently. A seagull, up late, cried once over the floating cradle and then struck out for shore. The rattling of the sail made more and more of Morgan's mind: he felt himself sinking into a relaxed slumber.

"Good night, Happy . . ."

"Pleasant dreams, Morgan."

And even though he could not see him, Morgan knew that Happy was smiling.

the moog

The seas howl higher
The sky it thunders low
And the solitary seaman
Dreams of no more journeys to go.

He's sleeping by the fire
Under strawberry waves of wine
And drinking the smoke of his corncob choke
Run smooth by oceans of brine

A blood-red sea falls short of its tide,
A landfall flees fore the bow
And neither the either is very wide,
Dreaming of no more journeys to go.

The drumming of a wind-taut lanyard threaded itself through the tune. It surged with the swells and clicked silent seconds with the pauses.

Alive and grunting, Morgan flopped over onto his back and opened his eyes. He had expected to see rafters of music in some cosy cottage, but instead he was greeted with a shock of candycane sailcloth billowing against the robin's egg blue of a foreign sky. The sail was full of the wind, brilliant--almost too brilliant--in the light of day.

"Ahoy!" cried Happy's voice. The singing had come to a halt.
"Welcome aboard!"

Morgan propped himself up on his elbows and blinked. He was still nude, like his sister, from the night before. Silhouetted against the rise and fall of the horizon sat Artha and Happy. Her back was to the mast at Morgan's feet and she was smiling. Her crankiness had vanished with the moon and her face shone like the sun. And Happy was aft, his hand riding on the tiller.

"Are you talking to me?" Morgan yawned.

"We've both been awake for hours," said Artha, "getting suntans!"

Then she went back to her humming.

"Have a good sleep?" asked Happy.

"Boy, did I ever! It was just like I was home in my dresser drawer. No, it was even better. The boat rocked ever so gently. How about you Happy? Did you get any sleep at all?"

"Oh, yes," the steersman said nodding. "Happy dozed off from time to time."

To prepare himself for his first morning in the new world, Morgan leaned over the gunwale of the sailbark and dipped his head deep into the lakewater. Cold waves coursed up his neck to his shoulders and then fell back around his ears. Morgan's long blond hair washed lazily about on the watery surface while below, his lips burbled out slippery bubbles of air. He came up dripping and wide-awake.

"Whereabouts are we?" Morgan asked, gazing off into the distance.

"We're heading for the Nar," said Happy. "The Lake . . . er, Lake Ygena . . . empties into the Nar and the Nar takes us down to the Moog."

"The Moog?"

"That's where we whorespipple live. It's on the seashore. On the Mool of Sean. I hope you like it."

Morgan doubled over the sailcloth blanket and sat upon it. Over Happy's shoulder trailed a wiggle of white bubbles, their night-time path. It stretched into the cloud-hugging horizon. Looking back over his own shoulder to see where they were going, Morgan saw before the prow a curved

shoreline, a blue hint in the distance, branching out like legs on their either side.

"Anything will be better than that swamp," said Morgan. "Those monsters crawling all over . . . The giant bats and frogs . . . "

"There's nothing like that in the Moog. But you know," Happy paused, "the frog-men don't usually attack pipple. Vampires will, but not the frog-folk. That's odd what happened, isn't it? But then again, strange things do happen in the Bog . . ."

"Hey, you guys!" interrupted Artha. "What's that floating in the water over there? It seems to be alive and moving."

Morgan and Happy both looked to where Artha was pointing with her spear. Not three hundred feet away, cleaving to the tossing waves, was an orange and white dappled lump of animal.

"Now that's no lake-creature," said Happy. "It's not big enough. But we can go take a look!" With that, he took in some sail and brought the sailbark about. As they cut across the wind, the voyagers began to make out some of its features. "Whatever it is, it's pretty dull colour for the Land of Gore."

"Why, it's a dog!" shouted Morgan.

"A bulldog!" Artha added and put down her spear.

"A water-logged old wreck of a bulldog!" chimed in Happy. "Whatever a bull dog could be."

The sailbark soon overtook the animal and pulled up alongside. The bulldog seemed to be in pretty bad shape. Its sides, heaving uncertainly with every breath, forced a random spray of foam-flecks from its nostrils.

There was not a spark of life left in the old dog's bleary and bloodshot eyeballs.

"It doesn't seem to see us," remarked Artha with interest.

"And," Morgan added, "it's just swimming in circles!"

"Aw, the poor old dog . . .," said Happy. "Let's bring it aboard!"

Alerted by the sound of their voices, the bulldog glanced a sideways second in the trio's direction and then lurched back to plowing the waves with its nose.

"Okay," said Artha. She threw her spear onto the floorboards.

"Morgan, you give me a hand. And Happy, you lean the other way when we bring the dog aboard." Grabbing a handful of loose skin, Artha dragged the dog, which was beginning to growl, up to the side of the boat.

"Shut up!" snapped Artha. "Do you want to be saved or not? Morgan, don't just sit there! Get a hold of those rear legs."

But before Morgan could even move, the old dog had broken away from Artha's grip and was paddling for dear life away from its rescuers.

"Come back here, you!" growled Artha as she caught the dog's tail and pulled it back. "Now grab on tight this time, Morgan, and we'll lift on three. One . . . two . . . THREE!"

"URF!"

Working together, Morgan and Artha hoisted the old stubborn bulldog into the air. The dog exploded into a clawing bundle of wet fur and paws: snapping, it scratched and snarled as it scrabbled against the hull of the sailbark. One leg slipped free of Morgan's grasp, popped in, then out of the boat, and back in again.

"Steady! Steady!"

With the help of the two children, the bulldog tumbled over the gunwale in bits and pieces and thumped down upon the floorboards. After a gasp, it pulled itself together and rose unsteadily to its feet. There the old dog planted its feet as far apart as possible and started to shake. The shaking began at its belly and spread quickly in both directions until there was nothing save a wet, rattling blur. Everyone from Happy who was aft, to Artha who was fore, fell heir to the lashing shower of water.

"Is that all the thanks we get?" giggled Artha.

The dog staggered around the mast several times inspecting the crew. Then stopping, it looked Morgan straight in the eye.

"Boy, oh boy," said Morgan, scratching the dog behind the ears, "you have the most bloodshot eyes I've ever seen outside The Pig's Bladder!"

Lolling out the corner of its mouth, the dog's tongue jerked up and down with its every pant. The half-dry old bulldog crowded against Morgan's bare leg to rub against it and then allowed itself to collapse in a heap upon his foot. It coughed once and fell into a deep and swimless sleep.

"Sure is a friendly pooch," observed Happy.

"I wonder," mused Artha, "how it came to be out in the middle of the lake?"

Morgan shrugged his shoulders. "Beats me."

"Stranger things have happened in the Land of Gore," explained Happy and smiled the sunniest of smiles. "But he's all right now!"

A seagull, one of many that patrolled the awakening shoreline, swooped down crying like a baby. Artha tried to hit it with a dry crust

of bread, but missed. Nevertheless, she caused a flurry of contending wings and bills to flap noisily and jab one upon the other, even after the largest of the lot had escaped with the bit of breakfast safely in its belly.

A shiver scuttled down Morgan's spine and Happy continued to smile.

The River Nar was a broad band of blue that wound lazily through the natural luxury of the rainforests of Gore. On its either side, the papyrus reeds grew tall and clawed drily at the lakebound wind. Immediately behind those reeds lurked a hectic clutter of vines and ferns, banana trees, stunted palms and flower-speckled bushes. The brush and the shrubbery ran wild, and all else was spearhead grass.

But this was only ankle matting to those monstrous trees, the guardians of the Nar, that climbed their twisty, swooping ways through the humid air toward the hot and yellowing sun. High against the blue that shifted onwards with the cloudy stringlings, rode the proud and leafy plumage that topped all Gore.

From time to time, a blessedly uncrowded coconut grove would appear, make peace, then drift quietly by the bright red-and-white speck that was Happy's sailbark.

"It's all downhill from here on in," declared Happy as he loosened a rope that held up the sail. The sailcloth popped and flapped, but eventually fell out of the wind. "We can drift down with the current now," he explained, securing the cloth to the jib with small ropes. "You only need the sail when you come upriver from the Moog or when you're cutting around the Moog itself."

"Wow! What a river!" exclaimed Artha. "It's so wide I can hardly see across it!"

"It narrows up a bit further on."

The sun overhead had not yet risen halfway to its highest point in the sky, but already the boat was hot to the touch. Everyone in the boat, including the dog, found his nostrils and throat dry to cracking and the brightness of the water's surface, next to blinding. It was for that reason Happy steered his craft into the passing shadows along the riverbank. There the air borrowed the oily dampness from the shoreline vegetation.

The foursome were close enough to the edge of the river to hear the continual crackling noise of the growing papyrus, the slapping of the waves upon the reeds, the whirring of countless insects, fireflies and crickets, and the slight but distinct cries of some unknown and unnamed long-legged waterfowl.

The trees and the bushes were alive with a hundred varieties of birds, each cawing its own tune, each bearing an exotic combination of cinnabar, orange, lemon, celadon, bright blue and turquoise, chocolate, indigo and even ebony.

Small unseen animals and snakes scurried about, rustling in the grass, and disturbed the reed-tops here and there as they busily pursued their individual interests and breakfasts. Occasionally a heavier crash in the forest's distance would mark the passing of a monster. A respectful silence would then fall upon the water, only to be broken a minute later by the click and clatter of the resuming jungle life.

"Is this a keen place or what, Happy!" remarked Artha. "This Land of Gore gets better and better the more I see of it! I can hardly wait to get to the Moog. It must be super!" Artha then turned to Morgan who was petting the puffing dog. "I'm almost happy . . . in fact, I am happy you threw the rain-orb in the skywater! This place sure is a lot livelier than old Tilantes. Everybody was so glum and never wanted to do anything but sit around and drink."

"I guess I'm happy we're still alive . . . ," said Morgan, "but if I had the chance to bring all the people to life that I . . . er, all the people that got killed by the world-storm, I certainly would."

"Ig! What a thought! Making a bunch of zombies! But then again, there were a lot of keen people weren't there? You wouldn't bring back the dwarfs, though, would you? They're nothing but beasts!"

"I guess I wouldn't bring back the dwarfs, no. Maybe Stoolput. He was an okay dwarf. But I would be happy to see lots of other people alive again . . . Mary the Mule, Brine Stackhouse, Gobble, Old Tom, Hurler, the old man, and so many others."

The bulldog perked up its ears and licked Morgan on the hand.

"I don't know what you're talking about," piped up a voice from the tiller, "but I'm Happy too!"

There was laughter in every corner and the dog barked so loudly that a flurry of ducks broke out of the reeds and ran flapping down the river in front of the sailbark that was ambling along after the seabound current.

Later on in the day, towards noon, the dampness of the shady

forest had long since dried up and blown away with the idle upriver wind. Happy, Morgan, the bulldog and Artha all sat sweltering under the sail spread out from the jib. From time to time, Happy would reach out into the stream and splash some water on top of the sailcloth to relieve them of the full brunt of the sun's burning rays. Shading her eyes with her hand, Artha turned to face her brother.

"You know, Morgan," she said thoughtfully, "you probably have one more wish coming from the rain-orb. Wishes usually come in threes."

"I do. Or at least that's what the old man told me and everything he's said has seemed to pan out so far."

"Well, we don't want to blow it on anything that we don't really need, like getting out of danger or anything like that. I mean, like I have my spear and that's enough for most emergencies. If you find it truly necessary, however, go right ahead and use it. But you know what I mean?"

"Sure, I know. I won't just blow it on anything. I'll ask your opinion first. How's that sound?"

"That sounds just fine. That way we can't go wrong. Sure is hot out, hey? It must be at least 90 in the shade."

"It sure is," agreed Morgan, "and I sure wish I had a nice cold bottle of Guinness right now . . ."

But before Morgan could say "oops, I take it all back!", a flute-like whisper stole out of the dank depths of the rainforest and sang across the full breadth of the river, echoing all the way. And at that same instant, a bottle of Guinness, sweating beads of freshness, appeared in the dismayed Morgan's hand.

"Oh no, you dodo dodo dodo! You just blew it! And just after I told you not to! How can any one person have such a positive lack of brain? Ow wow ow . . .," groaned Artha.

"Um, well . . .," mumbled Morgan, "I blew it, I guess. I have to admit that . . . But at least we have a nice cold Guinness!"

"Now it's a good thing you wished for that, Morgan," smiled Happy. "We were all getting mighty thirsty and it doesn't do to be thirsty on a Thirstday morning!"

"Did it ever occur to you that you could've wished for a thousand wishes, or for the rain-orb or something like that?" screamed Artha, waving her bony fingers about her head.

Morgan shook his head sadly no. To hide his embarrassment, he took a large swig of the ice-cold Guinness. As he passed the sweating bottle to Happy, a malty coolness fanned out in his chest and dulled what smart there was.

Happy wrapped his long fingers about the Guinness bottle and tilted it up. His adam's apple bobbed three times before he managed to wrench the magic draft away. And when he did, the bottle parted from his pink lips with a kiss.

"Here, Morgan. Pass the bottle to Artha. But don't throw the bottle out when you're finished. It's such a pretty shape and colour!"

Morgan held out the half-full bottle to Artha.

"I don't want any!" she snapped in a pet. She turned her bare back on the rest of the boat and brooded upon the stupidity of mankind, or at

least, Morgankind. Her eyes narrowed as she glowered balefully into the shimmering and wiggling distance that hung oppressively over the river.

Morgan handed the bottle back to Happy.

"Here, doggy," called the whorsepipple. "Do you want a snort?"

Happy held the bottle out for the dog to examine. The dog sniffed at its glass-ringed opening and lifted a sparse orange eyebrow. With no further ado, the old red-eyed animal fell to gulping and guzzling the Guinness as if its life depended upon it.

"That's enough! That's enough!" chuckled Happy. "You're cutting into Artha's share." Holding the bottle by the neck, he carefully placed it upright in his empty sandwich bucket. "We'll save the rest of the Guinness for Artha when she feels like taking it," Happy explained to Morgan in a whisper.

Minutes soon slid into hours as the boat drifted onwards. Morgan noted that after they had rounded a countless number of riverbends that made up the Nar, the richness of Gore had become predictable. One minute was like the next: beautiful.

The sound of flopping wings on churning water shook Artha out of her darkling thoughts and made her sit up and stare. Off to port cruised a beast about twice the size of Morgan and Artha put together.

"Hey, look, you guys! A dragon!" she shouted and grabbed up her spear from beside her. "Wheel the boat over closer to it and maybe we can nail it!"

Happy fell to rowing with his long pole. At the approaching shouts and splashes, the dragon whipped the finlike crest on the rear of its head about and glowered at the four beings in the sailbark with its lizard-gray eyes.

"Can't you hurry it up, Happy?" shouted Artha who was balancing on the bow with her spear up. "It's getting away on us."

Morgan could see the dragon pause thoughtfully for a second. Then with a consuming rumble, it snorted out a fiery blast between its comblike teeth. After this gentle warning, the dragon refolded its forelegs under its pebbly breast and raised its long fine tail to the wind. Wisps of yellowish black smoke trailed from its nostrils as the beast tossed back its crest and sped casually off across the river, soon to vanish completely from sight.

"Wow . . .," breathed Artha. "A real dragon! And I didn't even know they could run along the water like that!"

"We call those dragons basilisks," offered Happy as explanation. "They live in caves along the riverbanks. Basilisks can kill just by looking at you, or so they say. I've never seen it happen but I have seen them burn up a sailboat just by snorting fire on it! They keep very much to themselves though, I find."

The sailbark reached the spot where the basilisk had been the moment before. Morgan felt a pungence eat into his nostrils. It reminded him of something like brimstone and something like ozone.

"Wow! A basilisk! I think I'll take that Guinness now. I sure am thirsty! Wow!"

Presently the warm upriver breeze cooled to briskness. Happy set to hoisting the sail once again.

"We need the wind to tack from here on in," he said. "The tide is coming in and stilling the current."

Morgan and Artha sat up with interest as the sailbark caught the wind and shot out towards the centre of the river. The dog as well was up, front paws draped over the gunwale and its neck stretched into the freshening breeze.

Clipping along at a pretty pace, the sailbark rattled out over a riffling deck of ripples until it reached the larger riverwaves, upon which it slapped down hard again and again. The striped sail strained against the wind's tightening muscle and drove the sailors onward. Spray exploded across the dip and heave of the bow.

A bend in the river rode up before the dog who had made its way to the very front of the boat and stood on its hind legs, wagging its stubby tail.

"Hang on," shouted Happy as he steered a bit to port. "Here we go!" And when the sailbark caught the wind full on, it heeled over, then raced forward faster than before, towards a chosen tree on the riverbank which was curving off to portside in front of them.

The horizon, revolving upon some distant axle, unwound to reveal more and more of the greening rim of river. The heavy vegetation on the left bank crept slowly back as the boat swept on.

All of a sudden, a blast of seawind, a surfy boom and a white colossus of a castle crowded together to overwhelm Morgan and Artha's

senses. Even the dog wondered up at the towering sight that seemed to float weightless in the air.

"The Moog," cried Happy. "There's the Moog!"

And there it was indeed, resplendent before their amazed eyes.

Its obvious centre, the castle, was founded on an island in the middle of the broad rivermouth and swelled up from that narrow base to dominate the clear sea sky behind it. From imperial heights the flighty, but steadfast fortress looked down upon the Moog, its harbour, the village and the coastal plains like a protective giant. Its walls shone like the purest of marble; its bartizans interrupted the battlements according to some incidental pattern and the lofty turrets, which reached high into the blue sky, were aflame with scores of streaming pennants.

Stretching a delicately arched bridge to its either side, the castle joined together the separate riverbanks--the riverbanks that were peppered with white mud huts, straw-woven shelters, flowery beach umbrellas and the pastel pink tents and flickering yellow streamers of the marketplace. Although the sailbark was yet a distance from the Moog, Morgan could see tiny dots milling around in the little town's every corner.

In the harbour below, yellow and brown brickwork lined the riverwalls between the wharves. The harbour itself swarmed with at least a dozen sailbarks of all sizes, each decked out in the gayest of colours: rosy rouge and glowing orange, turquoise, striking gold, grass green and even milky white. Flitting around the castle's watery girdle, the playful

boats winked out under the shadows lain down by the drawbridges to explode again into brilliance when the sunbeams fell once more upon their sails.

Beyond this thriving pocket lay a restless sea, deep blue and sparkling with the sun.

"Who lives in the castle?" asked Artha at long last. "I thought you said you didn't have any king!"

"Oh, nobody lives in Castle Moog!" laughed Happy. "What an idea! We only use it for parties. We whorsepipple prefer to live in those mud huts you see along the shore. They're easier to heat in the winter."

"Well, who built the castle if you don't have any king?"

Happy shrugged. "It's been there as long as I remember."

"Um," grunted Artha and fell silent.

"Happy?" started Morgan. "What are your winters like?"

"Like? This is the tail-end of winter right now. I guess you'd have to say they're rainy."

Just as Morgan was going to open his mouth and ask another question, a white barge teeming with whorsepipple broke into view. A white mare on a riverside path was at work tugging the barge against the incoming tide.

"Hey ho!" shouted the long-legged whorsepipple leading the horse. The others in the boat wheeled about in their seats and they too began to wave vigorously at the nearing sailbark.

Happy waved back.

"Hey, Happy," shouted a voice from the barge. "Who are your friends?"

"They sure are fat!" commented another.

"Who's that handsome blond brute with the crown?" cried out one female voice.

Happy's sailbark soon overtook the horsedrawn barge. When he drew abreast, Happy dropped the sail out of the wind and the sailbark coasted alongside at the same speed.

Morgan and Artha regarded the pink-cheeked whorsepipple with as much interest as the whorsepipple regarded them. Like Happy, they were all smiling and slight, all as graceful as dancers. Their hair was as fine as cornsilk and riffled gently in the wind. They were mostly blonds of differing shades, but Morgan spotted a light brunette giggling amongst them.

These happy creatures were all a-chatter with excitement.

The barge seemed a flowergarden afloat upon the sky blue Nar as each one of the whorsepipple, no matter whether boy or girl, was garbed in splendid fashion. Not a one among them outdid the others or was, for that matter, outdone or lost in the blossoming crew. They were all different, and they all maintained a bubbling harmony.

Some wore flared pants like Happy; and others, tiger lily jungle jumpers or leaflike bikinis. Boys and girls alike sported silks and gay cottons, crochets and ruffled blouses. Flowerchains hung from every neck. One honey blonde at the bow of the barge had on a loose-fitting tea gown, pale pink and open at the front. Others yet, like the blushing brunette, wore nought but the sun and the wind.

A tall handsome albino in a cream white pant suit leaned forward from his seat at the front of the barge. The honey blonde on his arm

blinked her large brown eyes at Morgan and smiled the sweetest of smiles.

"Where did you find those pipples, Happy?" asked the white boy as he adjusted his sunglasses.

This triggered off another broadside of questions.

"And the dog!" squeaked another. "Where did you ever find an odd dog like that?"

"Did you see the orchids?"

"Were they nice?"

"Tell us about them."

"Have you eaten today?"

In the face of this thickening web of queries, Happy rose from his seat and held up his hand for attention. "Quiet, quiet please, every-pipples!" he said, putting his foot on the gunwale of the white barge. "I want to introduce you to our new king, Morgan. And this is his sister Artha and her golden spear. And the dog is a bulldog. We found him swimming, of all places, in the middle of the Lake!"

A cry of awe rose up to the blue of the sky above.

"A king!"

"A real king!"

"Just what we've been waiting for!"

"What's a king?"

"Is that really his sister?"

"Isn't she busty?"

"A bulldog!"

"Imagine that!"

"In the middle of the Lake!"

Happy held up his hand again. "And another thing, whorsepipple," he cried out as loud as he was able. "Artha renamed the Lake. It's Lake Ygena now! What do you think of that? After their mother who was called Ygena!"

"Oh, how clever!"

"How nice!"

"Lake Ygena! Doesn't that have a pleasant ring?"

"Lake Ygena!"

"Hurray for Morgan and Artha!"

"Hurray for the bulldog!"

"Hurray for Happy!"

"Hurray for us too!"

"Hurray! Hurray!"

With that, Happy saluted the whistling and laughing whorsepipple and pushed away from the barge with his foot. After hoisting the sail once again, he sat down, but this time right on the edge of the transom. Turning around to the fore, he took the idling tiller into hand.

"We'll see you all back at the Moog!" he cried over his shoulder as the sailbark, making full work of the wind, knifed out into the wide playground of the harbour.

Morgan and Artha returned the whorsepipple's waves and gazed after the shrinking barge until all sound of the elflike people's cheering and celebration was lost under the wind and the rattle of the brimming sail.

"Sure is bright out," commented Artha to Morgan as she turned to squint up at the towers and the spires of Castle Moog. The seabreeze

lifted her raven hair from off her ivory shoulder and carried it shining and weaving against the rippling harbour water as the sailbark made for home.

"Oh yes," answered Morgan with a satisfied smile. "Sure is a fine day!"

Wispy clouds hung over the horizon and crept slowly on with the day. The sun was sitting low in the west. Blowing in off the sea, a fresh breeze raced over the day-baked and yellowsand beach and climbed up to where Morgan was parked at a clattering, chattering patio banquet table. As he munched a pear and looked all around, the wind ruffled through his hair, pushing it this way and that. It was at that moment he understood why the whorsepipple had chosen to live there in the Moog.

Artha was to Morgan's right; Happy, to his left; and they were both helping themselves, as he was himself, to the succulent dishes that had been prepared to welcome him and his sister, as well as the bulldog, to the land of the whorsepipple. Missing nothing, the bulldog was content having anchored himself between Happy's and Morgan's armchairs. Gathered around the borders of the table were dozens and dozens of merry whorsepipple, each smiling and reaching, chewing and passing, and from time to time, giggling to beat the band.

The board itself was groaning under a host of delicious dishes that were completely new to Morgan and Artha: there were tdbasco dills, tureens of chickweed soup with floating balls of pastry, cabbage rolls, toasted slices of hamplant and yoaksure pudding. On top of all this, gallons and gallons of milk flowed close to hand, not to mention the guiness. Circles

of clay bottles called jartles were packed into silver ice trays that spouted tall yellow tapers from their centres. In these gray-green jartles awaited a chilled treat that Happy had earlier described as guiness.

One of the pointy-topped jartles made its way to Morgan's hand. Holding it up in the light of the dying sun, he saw that the bottle and the cap were one.

"You have to pop off the clork before you can drink it, Morgan," said Happy next to him. "Like this."

Happy gripped the jartle in his right hand and cracked its head smartly against the edge of the wooden banquet table. The glazed clay cap pinwheeled high into the air and disappeared. Foam suddenly bubbled forth from the hole in the jartle's broken neck and streamed down its slimy belly to wind in and out of Happy's encircling fingers. "This guiness was put away for us when the whirld was young," he explained as he handed Morgan the opened jartle.

"Um," he said, licking the tingling liquor from his hand. "I think I'll have one too." And another pointy clork snapped off into the approaching dusk and went to join the first one.

"This guiness," smiled Morgan after he had taken a lingering draught, "tastes remarkably like Guinness. But what's more, it tastes better!"

Artha said nothing to this as she was busy chewing, but Happy nodded and smiled. So Morgan took a final swig before he returned to gobbling down more apples and oranges, and even some of the strange meatlike vegetables called roastbeets that lay simmering in their own gravylike juice.

"Tell us more about where you and Morgan come from, Artha," asked one pretty bare-breasted whorsepipple at the far end of the table. It was the giggling brunette from the barge. Her name, Happy had told Morgan, was Ezili. "Do, do," she begged in sweet soprano tones.

"Yes, yes," cried the table. Everyone nodded vigorously and pounded in time. Licking their fingers and reaching for another slice or morsel of whatever pleased them the most, the whorsepipple said in a single voice, "No pipple can tell stories like you can, Artha!"

Artha was standing up with a chickweed drumstick in her hand, obviously pleased with the enthusiastic reception of the afternoon's tale of the monster-fraught journey through the Bog.

"Well," she said and took a bite. She caught an errant flap of vegetable skin with her lower lip before she continued. "I suppose I could tell you the one about 'Morgan and the Dwarts'. Would you like to hear that one?"

"Oh yes! Oh yes, we would!" shouted the crowd around the table as they beat their sticky hands together. "Tell us! Tell us!"

"You'll have to be quiet though. I can't tell a story with you all shouting and carrying on like monkeys."

"We'll be still. We promise. We promise."

"Once upon a time," began Artha, leaning over with her eyes burning like black fire, "there was a land, rather an island, and on this island was a little boy named Morgan who had golden hair, blue eyes and a cute button nose right plunk in the middle of his fat smiling face . . ."

"That's King Morgan!" squealed the honey blonde who was directly

across the table. She bounced up and down in her chair and pointed "That's King Morgan in the story!"

"Shh . . . Keep it down, Melodee!" shushed the albino next to her. Still wearing his dark glasses, he was raptly gazing through a candle's flame at Artha's glowing face. A blood-red carnation peeped forth from the buttonhole in his cream-white lapel.

A black tress of hair coiled over one of Artha's eyes as she continued her task of unwinding another and another of the story's interwoven threads.

As Morgan and Happy had already heard Artha's rendition of the valiant charge down Headless Valley upon the dwarf stronghold of Iryntor, they spoke between themselves in low and uninterrupted whispers.

"How do you like the Moog?" asked Happy. He was stuffing the bulldog with bits of leftover hamplant.

"Oh, I like it!" nodded Morgan, settling back with his jartle of guiness. "I like it a lot. And one thing more: I'm really glad you whorse-pipple agreed to have me as king. I don't know how to do much else other than lumbering and that doesn't seem to be much of an industry around here . . ."

"Oh, we cut down a tree once in a while. But there's really no need to make a great to do about it. Heck, I suppose it's time we got up to date and had a king and all. You never can tell when one might come in handy."

"Did I ever tell you about my good friend, Mary the mule?"

"No, you didn't," said Happy, smashing open two more jartles.

"After Artha's story, you'll have to tell us all about her. She sounds like a very likeable mule."

And at that golden moment, a little hummingbird with ruby eyes appeared out of nowhere and hovered within a halo of fast-moving wings. It touched down on Morgan's shoulder and clicked off its buzzer. Hopping about like a feathered insect, the tiny bird made its way over to Morgan's big fat ear and pecked at it once, and then once again.

"Hey, a hummingbird!" cried out Morgan in surprise when he saw what it was. "They sure are friendly around here, aren't they?"

"A hummingbird?" asked Happy uncertainly. "I've never seen one of them before. . . Hummocks, harpies and hummingbirches, but never a hummingbird!"

"Um, well . . .," said Morgan thoughtfully. "How about that!" He was holding out wee crumbs of bread on the moistened tip of his finger and the hummingbird's needle bill was making short work of them. "It certainly is a hungry little beggar!"

Evening gave way at last. The violet blush that had been creeping up over the turquoise sky now deepened to a rich indigo. A deep blackness came to stand over that boundless wonder that was the Mool of Sean. Story-time candles flickered upon a breathless table, naked and alone under the listening stars.

The night dragged on and so did Artha's stories. Her honeyed words flowed like milk and the whorsepipple seemed to revel with a trusting delight in all she cared to tell them, whether it was a reworked version of "The Attack of the Frogmen", or "The Last Stand at Iryntor",

or just "Joan McBone's Silly Flirtation with Morgan on the Eve of his Greatest Night".

This last story set the girls around the table to tittering, especially Melodee who pressed her rosy lips into her hands at the merest mention of Morgan.

Morgan and Happy sat back enjoying themselves, and occasionally one of them would top up the guinness bowl in front of the old dog.

All attention was focused on Artha the storyteller, who was now brandishing her golden spear for effect. She paced the full length of the table, taking care not to step upon the plates and leftovers. Back and forth she spoke. Back and forth.

". . . and tomorrow, my friends," she announced to the white outlines of the faces around her feet, "we'll go out hunting and have ourselves a real live adventure!"

At this the whorsepipple, cheering rapturously and banging the tabletop with cups and forks, stormed to their feet.

"But right now, whorsepipple," she shouted, "what say we all go for a moonlit swim?"

"Hurrah!" went up the shout, "Hurrah!"

And all those whorsepipple who were wearing clothes shucked them off and tumbled after Artha and Ezili down across the warm silvering beach. Their naked bodies were ghostly white in the moonlight and like an army of joyful children they plunged into the frothcapped breakers that were rolling in to greet them from thousands and thousands of miles distant.

"Hey, wait for me!" called out Happy after them. He struggled to

his feet and hastily drained the dregs of his jartle of guiness. Ripping off his clothes as he went, he staggered off to join the swimmers. Then he turned, remembering, and almost fell over himself.

"Aren't you coming Morgan?" he shouted back across the beach.

"I'll be with you in a minute! I just want to finish off my guiness."

Far far far across the Mool of Sean a tiny star winkled blue and white razorbeams as it were a tumbling crystal in tomorrownight's sky. All the others, save for that one, were polished pebbles that wheeled slowly around in the most heavenly of formations.

Morgan was warm. He watched the whorsepipple playing and swimming and he knew the sea was warm as well.

"I'll just sit here a bit longer," he mumbled drowsily to himself and the night grew deeper, the seaside voices more joyful. The bulldog was snoring on his bare foot and the hummingbird was nestled safely in his hair. Before him on the table sat the golden circlet, the king's crown.

"It would be a shame to disturb the dog and the bird," thought Morgan to himself and started to nod.

And if it had not left a black drop of blood upon the third merlon of the seamost parapet, no one would have ever known of the wounded vampire's evening visit, even though it was framed for the longest time unmoving against the lessening moon.

Gentle voices from the sea sang in close harmony.

A blood-red sea falls short of its tide,
A landfall flees fore the bow
And neither the either is very wide,
Dreaming of no more journeys to go.

He's smoking by the fire
Under strawberry waves of wine
And drinking the dream of his corncob choke
Run smooth by oceans of brine.

The skies howl higher
The sea it thunders low
And the solitary seaman
Dreams of no more journeys to go.

friends-in-keeping

Rounded by the mighty boom of the surf on the rocks at break-water, the calm night drifted along under the star-lit and sable sky. But then at last, the swelling dawn began to coax shrill cries from the daybirds that nested along the Nar. The vigil of sleep was ending.

Sunlight and singing crept down and around the grand curving channel until the tovertips of Castle Moog paled with transparence and the day awoke.

The night air, cooler of beaches, evaporated gradually. Flowing down with the current, the day fanned out across the countryside and opened flowers. Leaves returned their faces to the east and the air above the sandy beaches began to shiver once again.

Two horses that had passed the night on the sands arose, touched noses and trotted off to a nearby and grassy pasture.

Closer to the castle, arms and legs started to stir and stretch. They untangled themselves from necks and waists, logs and even themselves. The whorsepipple, to greet their Fryday morn, scampered down to the sea, singly, in pairs or in groups of three. Footprints threaded themselves across the glistening gray stretches of lowtide sand and pointed the way to the watergames.

"Not it!"

"Not it!"

"Not it!"

"Ezili's it!"

First it was the voices. Then it was the mugginess. Morgan grunted and forced his eyes open. A whole world of unbelievable light and action rushed in to fill the vacuum. The immensity of the sea and the sky! The noise and laughter of the whorsepipple! The tide rolling in!

Sitting up, Morgan turned to look down the beach.

"Oog . . .," he groaned and fell back. His brains, as heavy as wet sand, sloshed slowly about in his skull, up and down one side and then sickeningly up and down the other. "Oohhh . . .," he trembled, his jaw hung woodenly open upon his sorry chest.

"I think maybe I ate too much . . . What a way to begin the day . . . Ooooh! I hope I can snooze just a wink or two more . . ."

Struggling with his gritty eyelids, he entertained delicious thoughts of lazing in some darkened room or upon a shady beach in the wet, cool sand. But his body, naked from the day before, shook violently, going hot and cold together.

"Maybe a warm beach would be better . . ."

But it was a warm beach: happiness, at that moment, was beyond his body. Morgan was sick to the stomach. He lapsed into a half-conscious state of pain and trouble.

One by one the dripping whorsepipple filed by him, giggling when their shadows happened to kiss. And then they ran away into the day.

"Here you go, your majesty," a soprano voice sang out on his left.

"Here's a nice warm gueness to perk you up."

Somehow the thought convulsed Morgan's innards. He shook his head as emphatically no as his soggy mind would allow and tried to wave the voice

away with his hand. But the little whorsepipplette to whom it belonged lingered on beside his armchair.

"Haven't you any cold juices?" Morgan finally squeezed out. He looked up at the girl. It was Melodee, the honey blonde.

"I could get some," she said, rolling her big brown eyes thoughtfully, "but I'd have to go and pick the fruit. Is pomegranate okay?"

Morgan considered the pomegranate. Never before in his life had he been offered pomegranate juice for breakfast. But there was his head and his stomach . . . After thinking of the ages it would take to come by the juice, he held out his hand for the guiness.

"I don't want to bother you."

A jartle of guiness appeared too quickly before his eyes. It seemed forever before he could wrap his trembling fingers about its clay sides. "Well, here goes nothing," said Morgan as he lifted the broken neck to his lips. Melodee waited attentively.

The first swallow was torture. The second was bitter still, but the trail at least had been broken. Then to his complete surprise, the third slid down his gullet as easily as water. Somehow the liquor within him tickled the first sunny sensation of the day. The horizon regained its stability. The blues of the sea and the sky let slip their conspiracy.

"Ah, thank you, Melodee! You really know how to look after me!"

A trim little body, warm with quickness, settled down upon the arm of the beachchair and snuggled close to his shoulder.

Looking into Melodee's face for the first real time that morning, Morgan was amazed to see there such freshness, such absence of pain. What

was more, her warm and open smile! "Her eyes are cowlike," thought Morgan, "in a nice sort of way." And they were, as they blinked generously from time to time. Her face seemed to be made only of milk and blood, if such a complexion were possible.

She smiled again and ran her fine fingers through his hair, chasing out the hidden heat.

"Where did you get these teeny feathers in your hair, Morgie?" she asked, wiping his cowlick down over his eyes. "Have you been sleeping with the birds at night?" She crawled into his lap and cooed in his ear, "I'm jealous." Then she gave it a playful bite.

Morgan coughed. His lungs seemed a bit heavy, but still quite serviceable.

"There was a hummingbird sticking around me all yesterday evening. I imagine it's off in the jungle now with its bird-friends again. Where's the bulldog?"

"He's up with Artha and the whorsepipple. At the Square. They're planning the fun for the day. Won't you come up and see the funny costumes they're making to go hunting in?"

Melodee jumped off his lap and started to pull Morgan up by the hand.

"Oooog," groaned Morgan. "I suddenly feel all icky inside. I need an aspirin. Do you have one handy?"

"A naspirin?" asked Melodee blankly.

"I'm sorry. I keep forgetting that I'm in the next world where there's no such things as aspirins . . . "

"We don't need them, whatever they are," smiled the whorsepipplette, "otherwise we'd have them. You just sit back and relax."

With that, Melodee was off and running to the larder for a bowl of honey.

And when Morgan had licked the last smear from the wooden spoon Melodee was holding up to his mouth, he did feel better. He actually came to stand up. And with Melodee's kind support, he made his way to the Moog Square where Artha's planning had not been slowed down by the heavy heat of the morning sun, but on the contrary, quickened.

Morgan and Melodee arrived to find the Square swarming with whorsepipple, sharpened sticks, gay flags, clubs and garbagecan lids. Everyone of these potential huntspipple displayed at least one scrap of brave metal. Kitchenpot headpieces were everywhere and fists and girdles bristled with knives and forks. Happy was sitting on the ground, his legs splayed wide apart and a chamberpot, a white porcelain affair, upon his head. He was helping one of his friends ram his arms and legs into old soup cans. Morgan noticed that the tops and bottoms to these cans had not been wasted, but rather hung around the whorsepipple's necks as shining pendants.

Under a pale green awning beside a white mud building were three excited whorsepipplettes busily holding still the pawing six horses that had been chosen for the hunt.

And there in the centre of the Square, dressed in a heavy canvas jerkin, stood Artha legs apart and surveying the tide of huntsmen milling about her.

"We all enjoy a good time, don't we?" she began.

At this, the chatter subsided. The whorsepipple nodded, their faces shining pink with happiness and anticipation.

"Good! Because I just thought of another dandy idea in the night. Why don't we bind ourselves into a company in service of the king? We can all be knights and ladies in King Morgan's Court!"

"That's a great idea, Artha!" came one reply.

"I don't know how you can think of such exciting things!" cried another.

"But," queried one hesitant voice, "how would we do it?"

"All we do is swear allegiance to each other." And as there was a cloud of bewildered faces all around, Artha went on. "All that means is that you just exchange gifts-of-goodwill."

Either raising their silky eyebrows or tilting their heads, the whorsepipple all looked at each other and shrugged.

"You don't have to look so worried," Artha laughed. "All that it entails is one gift. And it really doesn't have to be of any great value either. Bits of paper will do. It's not the gift, you see, but the thought behind it that counts. By the mutual exchange of gifts-of-goodwill, two people can become friends-in-keeping! Even two complete strangers. And you can build up an entire company with just a minor variation of the ceremony! So what do you think of that?"

"Holy crow!" exclaimed the body of whorsepipple.

"As simple as that?"

"Sure thing. Flowers work fine."

"Are there any particular colours?" asked the albino in the cream-white pant suit.

"Any colour will do, Luigilot."

Soon the Square was full of flowers of all sizes and hues. There were red and yellow long-stemmed roses, pink daisies, orange snapdragons and velvet carnations. And Happy came running up with the only lilies-of-the-valley. They bobbed up and down like little white bells.

"So what do we do now?"

"We have to make a circle around Morgan and me. Melodee, you get out there like the others."

The whorsepipple gathered around as they were told.

"Okay," sang out Artha. "That's good enough. Now here are the rules: I sing out a line of the vow and you all sing it after me. And at the same time, you pass your flower to your neighbour on the right. When you're in a circle like this, the vow binds all of you even though you just gave the one gift."

Then after a pause, Artha began to chant and the ceremony began. There was a flowery display of generosity every second line. The castle distant rang with the whorsepipple's responses.

I swear by this hand
 I SWEAR BY THIS HAND
 That gives this gift
 THAT GIVES THIS GIFT
 That entokens goodwill
 THAT ENTOKENS GOODWILL
 That ensures the hand
 THAT ENSURES THE HAND

That gets this gift
 THAT GETS THIS GIFT
 That entokens goodwill
 THAT ENTOKENS GOODWILL
 Which means I'll not forsake,
 WHICH MEANS I'LL NOT FORSAKE,
 Forget or mistake
 FORGET OR MISTAKE
 That hand high in pledge
 THAT HAND HIGH IN PLEDGE
 (A-holding the kedge)
 (A-HOLDING THE KEDGE)
 And the person attached thereunto.
 AND THE PERSON ATTACHED THEREUNTO.
 So in sickness or in health,
 SO IN SICKNESS OR IN HEALTH,
 In water high or low,
 IN WATER HIGH OR LOW,
 In want or in wealth,
 IN WANT OR IN WEALTH,
 In whatever the fates bestow,
 IN WHATEVER THE FATES BESTOW,
 I will be true to thee
 I WILL BE TRUE TO THEE
 And keep thee friend,
 AND KEEP THEE FRIEND,
 Til death do us part
 TIL DEATH DO US PART
 Or until thee and I connive
 OR UNTIL THEE AND I CONNIVE
 And mutually agree to rive
 AND MUTUALLY AGREE TO RIVE
 Our contract,
 OUR CONTRACT,
 Thus rendering it
 THUS RENDERING IT
 Null and void.
 NULL AND VOID.

The last word echoed again and again between the jungle and the castle.

"Okay, everypipple!" cried out Artha, holding up both hands. "You all kneel once and advance to give Morgan the flower in your hand!"

The whorsepipple did so; and soon Morgan, who was blushing from head to toe from the sun, held a marvellous bouquet under his nose.

"Now, Morgan. You throw them all up in the air over everybody's head!"

WHCOF!

A shower of flowers exploded against the bright blue sky and everyone, short or tall, jumped to recover an orchid or a water lily or at least, a dandelion.

"Now you're all knights and ladies of King Morgan's Court!"

The applause and shouts of joy were deafening.

"Can we do it again sometime, Artha? That was so much fun!"

"Maybe next week, Melodee. Not before." Turning around to face the crowd, Artha clapped her hands for attention. "All right! All right! Let's mount up. Time's a-wasting." She pressed a pinkish-white conchshell to her lips and made the glades and groves clearly ring with a bugling blast.

"Hurray for Morgan and Artha!" went up the shout.

"Hurray for us!"

This was followed by the clanking of pots and pans, spears and tinlid necklaces. Those that had them beat upon their dustbin-lid shields. Artha sprang upon a white charger and the whorsepipple followed suit. They piled two, three and even four upon the horses' big broad backs.

"Just the men, Melodee!" shouted Artha from the lead horse. Luigilot, sitting immediately behind her, handed Artha her golden spear. "The lady of the court stays at the castle while the knight is out slaying dragons! That's the rule!"

"Aw gee!" moaned the whorsepipplettes. "The boys have all the fun!"

Two or three girls slipped off their mounts and three grinning huntsmen rushed forward to take their places.

"Is everybody ready?" shouted Artha.

"YES, WE ARE!"

Putting her heels to her horse, Artha led off the company onto a junglepath. And the bulldog went rumbling after.

Morgan and the whorsepipplettes all stood around upon the lonely tiles of the Square and listened after the din and cheer of the hunting party as it faded deeper and deeper into the rainforests of Gore.

"Well, what should we do?" asked Morgan to fill the silence.

"Why don't we dress Morgan up like a king?" suggested Ezili.

"And put him in a shirt!" Melodee added.

"A nice white, ruffled shirt!"

"And put on his crown!"

"And comb his hair!"

The whorsepipplettes were merry again and danced about Morgan in a circle.

"Do I really have to wear a shirt?" asked Morgan. "I just got used to the idea of running around bare-legged and I sort of like it now. Besides I wanted to get a tan."

"Poo, poo," shushed Melodee as she led him off towards the castle by the arm. "Kings have to wear shirts, don't they, girls? And besides, you're getting a bit of a burn."

"Heck!"

"And quit complaining," giggled Ezili on his other arm, "Artha said that girls look better naked than kings do!"

Morgan had to agree, so he allowed himself to be led off to the wardrobes of Castle Moog and outfitted with one of the whitest, starchiest and most ruffled of the shirts that the giggling ladies of his royal court could find for him on such short notice.

Shaded from the nooning sun, Morgan and Melodee sat side by side on a couch beside a small pool which was swimming with blue and white lotusblossoms. The pool was sunken into the floor of the largest of Castle Moog's balconies. Overlooking the harbour, this balcony adjoined the king's quarters as well as the circular banquet hall that had been chosen as the royal courtroom.

The two of them, tugging on straws dipped into mint julep, spoke only when they felt they had something to say. Ezili was asleep over in the corner, curled up like the happy animal that she was. The rest of the whorshipettes were paddling noisily about in the middle of the harbour on an old barge that they used as a diving-raft.

"I didn't realize," said Morgan, "just how nice and cool the castle is compared to the rest of the Moog. It must be because of all the stone and the height. We certainly cash in on the seabreeze here."

"I really think Castle Moog is too chilly to live in. Are you sure you don't want to come and live in my hut? The nights here are absolutely freezing, believe it or not."

"No . . .," drawled Morgan. "I don't think so. It's expected of a king to live in a castle. And besides I don't get as cold at night as you whorsepipple do. I'm bigger and fatter."

"That's true," nodded Melodee. Then she sat up straighter. "Are all the pipple where you come from as big and fat as you?"

"Hah! That's a good one. In Tilantes I was just a kid. Everyone was bigger than me. Except, of course, for the dwarfs. But, boy oh boy, you should have seen the dwarts! They were to me as I am to the smallest of the whorsepipple. Big and scary!"

"Wow!" said Melodee in full awe of the very thought. "You must have come from a place ten times the size of Gore!"

"No . . . Surprisingly enough, I don't. Tilantes was an island that could fit into the Land of Gore thousands of times. The island was kind of crowded, or so I thought. But really, there was lots of room for everybody."

"Wow!"

"And I wish you'd stop saying 'wow'. That's what Artha says all the time. You whorsepipple are picking up toomany of her bad habits."

"I promise never to say it again, Morgie," vowed Melodee, balancing her sandal on the tip of her toe. "But Artha is rather keen, you know. Always full of ideas and go. She is kind of pushy though. I don't think she likes me very much. She looks right through me."

"I wouldn't worry about that. Artha looks through everybody. That's just the way she is. You soon get used to it."

"I suppose," said Melodee slowly.

At that moment the whorsepipplette, Ezili, rolled over in her sleep and moaned. Under her white arm, her face strained against some nightmare shadow. She kicked once as if starting to run, but then scrambled wide-awake onto her knees. With wide eyes she surveyed the balcony. Her dream had fled, leaving only Morgan and Melodee.

"What's the matter?" asked Melodee.

"Did you have a dream?" said Morgan.

Wrapping her arms about her chest, Ezili climbed to her feet. She was still staring wildy. "I'm cold!" she cried at last and ran through the door to the courtroom.

"I wonder what all that was about?" puzzled Melodee. "It's cool, but not that cold."

"She just had a dream. It's nothing."

"A dream? What's a dream?"

"Don't you know what a dream is?" asked Morgan. Melodee shook her head. "A dream is when you sleep and think you see all sorts of things that might happen, but really don't. Dreams might seem real, but there's no time in a dream, so they can't happen. Haven't you ever had a dream?"

The whorsepipplette shook her head again. With a pink-palmed hand, she brushed away the memory of the hair that had trailed across her face.

"No."

"Hm. That's funny. I have dreams all the time. I guess I'm just used to them. But maybe it is cold sleeping on the floor there. Remind me to have some of the whorsepipple chop down a few trees or so in case the castle does get too chilly tonight."

"We'll need some firewood for the feast tonight anyway."

"A feast?"

"Yes. Didn't you know? In the main hall."

"Are we? I didn't know that."

"Yes. Artha said so before you woke up."

"Did she? That'll be nice . . ."

"Yes. And we're going to have the most wonderful time!" sang out Melodee as she rose and ran over to the edge of the balcony. Morgan joined her at the rail and together they looked out into the jungle.

Morgan thought he saw a faraway flash of metal in the foliage and Melodee, at his side, believed she heard a squeal or a shriek force its way down the river.

But the wind gusted those dusty thoughts away.

Later on in the afternoon when Morgan and Melodee were hanging their legs over the side of the drawbridge that led to the Square, a humming chant, a song, came filtering through the plasticine leaves of the baobabs that lined the jungle path. At first it was only a tune, but as the singing grew nearer, the couple on the drawbridge could pick out more and more of the words until they could hear them all.

Ah hum, ah hum
It's from the hunt we've come
With a pig on a stick
And a dragon's neck
Ah hum, ah hum hum
Hum hum hum.

Artha rode into sight leading a half-mounted procession of singing whorsepipple. Directly behind her came a contrivance consisting of four horses, two at the front and two at the back, which carried between them, dangling from a long pole, an upsidedown wild boar. Happy faces bounced alongside, behind and before.

Morgan stood up to welcome the hunters back. Artha spied him and spurred her horse on with her heels. It cantered clip-clopping along the wooden bridge and came to halt in front of Morgan. Artha held her spear crossways above her head and spoke.

"Hoy! I bring tidings of great joy. Yon company of knights under the command of Artha the Iron Livered humbly bequest audience with the most august Morgan, King of all Gore!"

"Well, how was the hunt?" asked Morgan as he blinked up into Artha's eyes. Her back was to the sun and a corona of yellow light streamed out from behind her head. "Did you enjoy yourselves?"

"Aw, Morgan . . .," whined Artha. "Can't you even talk like a king?" The horse between her legs was fretting back and forth. With a forehead paler than usual, Artha frowned down on Morgan and Melodee and pursed a rosy pair of lips. "Can't you do anything right?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't grow up in your father's court like you did. I only know how to talk like a woodsman. I suppose I should try though . . ."

"Well, come on and say something!"

"Um . . .," paused Morgan. "What should I say?"

"Just welcome us back from the hunt and ask us how we fared."

"Ahoy! Artha the Iron Livered," started Morgan, but he stopped. A crimson flush crept up out of his ruffled collar.

"Go on," ordered Artha.

"Ahoy . . . Welcome back from the hunt and how did you make out . . . er, rather . . . fare?"

"Ah, forget it, Morgan! Forget it! You'll never make it! You'll never make it." Artha dug her heels into her horse's flanks and was away along the drawbridge. She entered the castle and disappeared into the royal stables.

The rest of the party was nearing. A cheering procession of huntsmen trooped onto the bridge. A cluster of whorsepipple crowded around Morgan and Melodee to show off their prize.

"We killed a pig for the feast tonight!"

"We surrounded it!"

"Luigilot stuck it!"

Morgan looked at the bloody pulp and tried to smile. "Very nice . . . It'll be a change from eating hamplant, won't it?"

"Hurray for King Morgan!" answered the body of whorsepipple. "What a good old king!"

The pig passed and up trotted a horse with a grisly green head in tow.

"We killed a basilisk!"

"A dragon!"

"Did it ever put up a fight!"

"My, my," said Morgan as he looked down upon the lizard's scowl.

"I'd certainly hate to meet one of those face to face in a dark alley!"

The dragon-hunters passed as well. Up came the third and final part of the expedition. It consisted of two whorsepipple bearing a heavy lump between them on what seemed to be a makeshift stretcher. The bulldog ran alongside puffing and panting. The heavy lump, as it neared, turned out to be Happy.

"Happy!" shouted Morgan in alarm. "What happened? Set him down, you two!"

Slowly the wounded Happy opened his right eye. The other was burned shut like the rest of his face. The top half of his purpled body was swaddled in silks and cottons and upon his chest balanced his chamberpot-helmet, cracked along one side and blackened all about with soot.

"Hello, Morgan . . .," croaked out Happy. He tried to smile. "I don't think I'll be able to make the banquet. I hurt . . . all over."

"Whatever in the world happened?" Morgan looked from face to face. He did not recognize the first fellow, but the rear stretcher-bearer was Luigilot.

"It was the dragon that did him in," muttered the albino.

And as his partner did not go on, the first stretcher-bearer spoke up. "It was right before we came upon the pig! But Luigilot here killed the dragon to even up the score. Right through the gizzard! Skk!"

The bulldog wagged its tail uncertainly at this.

Morgan grew red in the face. "You mean to tell me that you all went on hunting after this happened?" The bulldog stopped wagging its tail.

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Luigilot, "but the patient himself insisted that we not stop as it might displease you."

"Now that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!" stormed Morgan. "How does anyone know what would please or displease me? What do you think I am? A heartless monster? Use your heads next time! In fact, make sure there isn't even a next time!" The bulldog let its stub of a tail hide between its legs.

"Yes, your majesty," said Luigilot stiffening. "You'll of course, tell Artha yourself . . .?"

Morgan hesitated. "Yes . . . I will. Tonight! Now hurry up and take Happy up to the royal bedchamber. Can't you see he's in pain? And rub some butter on those burns. On the double!"

Shaking his head, Morgan turned away from the sorry load and looked into Melodee's big round face. She tried to smile, but the corners of her mouth would not curl up. Instead she reached out to him.

"What's going to happen next?" he mumbled to himself.

Discovering a mosquito happily dining on Morgan's left cheek, Melodee brushed it aside. The little insect, swollen purple with royal blood, smeared across the king's face and left there a pale trail of gore.

"We'd better look to Happy's wounds, Melodee. And the preparations for the feast," said Morgan at long last. "And we'll have to round up a few pipples to go out and chop down some trees."

Melodee said nothing, but returned, walking at his side, into the cool of the castle. And the bulldog, tired from the hunt, followed along sadly behind.

the banquet

The hearth was aroar with blazing logs. Over the flames turned the pig on a spit. It was surrounded by a coterie of anxious attendants: one wound the handle; one tasted and spread the spice, while Ezili the headcook basted and watched the dripping juice spit sizzling onto the one-time tree trunks.

The fireplace was a marvellous stone affair that stretched almost from one side of the circular banquetroom to the other. Above the fire itself rode the dragon's head, the trophy of the day. Before its burning eyes sat circles of knights and ladies upon the steps that ran around the room. Upon their faces was the hallow of the flickering firelight. Giant shadows of the cooks danced around the hall as the whorsepipple, eagerly awaiting their first taste of roast pig, chattered and laughed in a hundred separate conversations.

Still dressed in her hunting garb like the rest of the huntspipple, Artha sat close to the cooking pig and made loud and happy talk with all those within the circle of her hearing. Luigilot said nothing all the while. He merely sat back, a white shade at Artha's side, and listened.

"Bring on the gueness!" shouted one whorsepipple.

"Hunting makes me thirsty!" cried out another.

"We need lots and lots!"

In response to the call, a broadly smiling whorsepipplette led in a little wagon filled to the brim with jartles of gueness. A shower of hands fell upon the passing wagon and the jartles disappeared faster than anyone could count them.

"Let's have a drink to the hunt!" cried out Artha. She seized up a jartle and snapped off its cap against the edge of the stone step she was sitting upon.

"To the hunt!"

"To the hunt!"

"Hurray!"

The room downed the first malty toast of the day. Artha too, lifting the ragged neck of her gueness jartle to her lips, took a swig and a swallow. "Not bad," she was heard to remark as she spit out a crumb of clay. "Not bad for beer."

And the room was gay. The curved dome above hummed with the merry sounds of a hundred throats. The air was a pleasant mixture of jasmine, incense and roasting pork. And every face was shining with the happy fire.

But then the double doors at the rear of the hall banged open to still the chatter. Whispers whistled from corner to corner as Morgan and Melodee entered the banquetroom. In waddled the bulldog after them. Morgan was dressed as he was in the afternoon, but Melodee had changed into a flowing pink dress with a laced front. A lull, a happily incomplete silence, rested uneasily upon the crowd to await news from the king.

"Happy is not much better," announced Morgan. "He's still in pain. He says he feels better, but not well enough to join us tonight."

There were varied sounds of relief around the room.

"And another thing! He said that he wishes that everyone enjoy himself to the utmost and forget his absence."

Artha stood up holding her clay bottle on high. "Let's give three cheers for Happy! Three rousing cheers to make him feel better. Never was there a braver huntsman, nor a gentler whorsepipple!"

"Hip hip hurray!"

"Louder!"

"Hip hip hoorray!"

"Come on, you pipple. All the way to his room!"

"Hip hip HOORRAY!"

After the hubbub had died down, Morgan asked if the pig was done. Ezili turned around munching a crisp brown crust and nodded. "Yes, it is, your majesty Morgan," she answered. "And it tastes pretty good too!" Then she giggled.

"Then let us begin!" commanded Morgan. He sat down upon the pillow that Melodee had put in his place.

Carried by the cook's two helpers upon a makeshift stretcher, the golden-brown spitted pig found its way to the centre of the hall. There it lay in its juice, steaming all sorts of delicious smells towards the ceiling.

"Who wants to carve up the pig?" asked Morgan.

"Luigilot'll do the honors," answered Artha from across the hall. "Go ahead Luigi. You be father!"

Sitting up with a jerk, the albino at Artha's side looked around the room and adjusted his darkglasses. He hulked over to the fireplace where the cook's scimitar was resting and seized it up in both hands. Luigilot stalked up to the pig and raised the weapon slowly into the air. The scimitar hung there, its thin, broad blade curving back towards its handle for strength. Two tiny fireplaces waited upon his darkglasses.

"Okay," said Morgan.

Zop!

The blade followed hard upon the word and flashed across the rear of the roast pig. The stroke caused the upper hind leg to flop off onto the floor and the pig to spit out the baked apple in its mouth. A thunderous applause shook the walls of the banquetroom. The apple was still rolling when a slender hand shot out of the waiting circle to snatch it up and make short work of it.

Ezili and her helpers rushed forward to dish up the slices of roast pork as they fell from the scimitar. And as soon as they were able, they distributed equal portions to everyone in the banquet hall.

Cradling part of a leg joint in his hands before him, Morgan leaned over to Melodee who was nibbling on a boneless chunk of pork drenched in barbeque sauce. "Well, what do you think of this new dish?"

"It's better than hamplant," she said between bites. "It's good."

"We'll have to make a point of having this every Fryday. Only there'll be no hunting dragons!"

"Yum yum!" agreed Melodee as she buried her face in her juicy slice.

Artha was pacing back and forth in front of the glowing embers in the fireplace. She was telling stories again, waving her golden spear about her head and making explosive gestures with her hands. The whorsepipple were sitting in concentric rings, arms around their knees and their ears wide open. " . . . and then half of us, having dismounted, closed up the circle around the dragon. The rest of us, able horsemen that we are, rode boldly around the outside shouting and beating our armour. The horsemen also provided a second wall of warriors that the dragon would have to face were it so lucky as to escape the first wall."

A hundred rapt faces leaned forward to catch each hypnotic word and gesture.

"In this case, however, the dragon was not so lucky. It charged this way and that, but soon found that it was surrounded on its every side. Its final playground was shrinking with each passing second. In a desperate bid to escape, the dragon blazed forth fire from its mouth and both nostrils and threw itself upon one of our bravest men, Happy. But it was all in vain. The creature had flung itself upon Happy's readied spear which buried itself deep within the dragon's midsection."

Two hundred eyes widened in the dimming of the light.

"Then like a white angel of mercy, Luigilot burst out of the jungle, his dagger flashing on high, and seized the cruel dragon from behind. With one gallant slash, he lay the attacking monster low. Spewing forth its black blood from a second grin that stretched across its throat from ear to ear, the wormbeast died!"

All eyes came to bear upon Luigilot, the only hero present. He was sitting in the shadows, modestly paring his nails with the famous dagger.

"I think we should show a sign of appreciation: to Happy who suffered for his valour, having his left side burnt to a crisp in the line of duty; and to Luigilot, Happy's selfless rescuer, who did such a marvellous job of slitting the monster's throat. I want these boys to know just how proud we are of them. Let's send up a cheer that can be heard all the way to the royal bedchambers where Happy is recuperating."

A mighty roar rattled the garbagecan lids that hung along the walls. Every last whorsepipple, knight and lady alike, let go with the full power of his lungs. The din of clashing shields, swords and spoons tore at the domed ceiling.

After the noise had died down to a dull rumble, one little whorsepipplette straightened up and waved an arm. "Tell us about how you caught the pig!"

The banquet hall exploded in agreement.

"Yes, yes!"

"The pig! The pig!"

Artha, the spear at her side, held out her left hand, palm downward, to quell the swelling roar. "The pig," she began over the throbbing merriment, "put up a good fight!" At this there were many good-hearted cheers. "We were short-handed, of course, as there were three huntsmen out of action: Happy and two attendants. But this, as it turned out, played not a . . ."

FASH!

A burst of light as intense as magnesium exploded in the main entrance. For a dazzled moment the hall was stricken blind. No one, except for perhaps Luigilot, could see the humpy figure that stalked out of the murky white smoke that smelled oddly like burnt matches and smouldering peatmoss. The room gradually took on its darkness once again.

"Aghhh! It's the witch!"

"She's come to hex us!"

"On her lightningbolt!"

"Help, oh help!"

Drawing back from the centre of the banquet hall where stood the witch, the whorsepipple huddled together and peered out from behind their uplifted arms. What Morgan beheld before him he swore to be Mary Wortle, the old crone that farmed potatoes on the Low Road to Tubbersport. The old lady of the lightningbolts flashed her good eye around like a search lantern. From the fireplace to Morgan, she inspected the

gathering and her eye lingered over the greasy heap of ribs and pigfat beside her on the floor. Then with no warning whatsoever, she snapped her gnarled fingers in the trembling air before her.

"Oowit's flesh ye're eating noo, tis it?" the black hole in her face croaked out. "Ye'll be bent on eating yer broothers next, Oy vow! Hee hee hee! And ye din't even send ole Agni an invitation. Wull, ole Agni's coom by hersowf, she 'as, and she's coom a loong wye to tull ye the noose and she wun't stoop her tulling wi' oydle chatter, she wun't. No, not by the seven veils of the moonstone, she wun't!"

The old hag turned her hump on the fire and stumped up to where Morgan and Melodee were sitting. Morgan felt the hair bristle on the nape of his neck. Melodee buried her nails in his shoulders and was squeezing so hard that he was tempted to wrench off her hand and throw it back in her lap.

"So litto Morgie's king noo," the witch cackled. "Wull, wull, wull! Stroynger things hev been known to heppen. Hee hee hee. Beg ter interdoose mesowf, but Oy'm whut's commonly called the Witch of Agnesi, Oy yam, Oy yam. And Ye're master Morgan, King of Gore, so they sye!"

Morgan nodded his head. "How do you do?" he gulped. "How can I possibly help you . . . Agni, er . . . m'am?"

The witch drew herself up as tall as she could only to convulse again in a silent cackle. Even the last whorsepipple in the furthest corner of the hall could see the toothless hole that was her mouth.

Morgan felt the bulldog cuddle closer as it tried to hide from the flicker of the witch's eyeball.

"Noo Oy'm glud ye ast, Morgan me lud," she went on. "Ye're learning a thing or three, Oy'm glud ter see. Noo Oy wun't kip you no more than whut's needed. But there is, Morgan lud, an intruder in the Land of Gore!"

Morgan raised his eyebrows, not in surprise but bewilderment.

"And thut intruder is none cother than a dwarf! Er ter be more exact, an 'arf-dwart man!"

Although only three people in the banquet hall realized the significance of that, a shocked gasp went up. The whorsepipple leaned forward, eyes frozen open, to catch each precious mystery.

"And do ye remember yer catechism, Morgan?" She fixed Morgan's eyes with her one. "Twas alwys yer weak point, wan't it?" She took a step closer, dragging her stiff leg after her. Her waterbeetle eyeball twinkled open into a darksome hole. He was not sure what it was, but Morgan felt himself being sucked towards the old hag. In a fit of panic, he tried to shake off the stare, but found that his hollow gaze could wander no further than the wizened flap of skin that shadowed her empty eyesocket. "Sooner trust a Dwarf than the 'arf-dwart man, 'Is botto-green 'eart is impossible ter scan . . ."

She shuffled away a pace, but continued to hold Morgan in her sway. "Oy thought it ownly fair ter tull ye, after all, ye're the king whut sits upon the throne o' me beloved country." She curtsied like a young girl and grinned toothlessly. "And Oy've coom ter tull ye

Oy've found yer bobbo, as well." From under her black-beaded shawl she withdrew with age-battered fingers, a ball of light. The rain-orb! And it was shining as brilliantly as ever. Rainbows played leisurely about the room.

"And it's been this litto bobbo whut's been tulling me all. The soul of the sun knows all, will tull all! And Oy'm surprised at ye, Morgan, for ye're the star of the 'ole bleedin' show! Ye're in the past, Oy see, and ye're in the future too! Noo doosen't thut put yer sweatin' mind ter rest?"

It was only then that Morgan felt a bead of sweat working its way across his forehead. He wiped his brow with a napkin, but it was so greasy that it did not help at all.

"Oy'm so glud thut ye've all started calling the Lake, Lake Oygena. Oy'm so glud o' thut, Oy yam. For this litto pretty tulls me thut yer moother ware a rare owld girl, she ware. Aye, a foine thing to sit befowr a king, she ware!" The witch juggled her head up and down as she giggled into her hand.

"What are you saying, old hag?" barked Artha. She walked out into the light of the dying fireplace. "Queen Ygena was my mother as well as the mother of Morgan. She was a queen and a fine lady!"

"Ooowit's Artha, it is, it is!" cackled the witch as she juggled around to face the girl with the golden spear. "It's Artha o' the Pink Nippo. A foine girl! A foine girl! Wull noo, Oy wure just tulling Morgan how foine a lidy yer moother ware, Oy wure. And Oy see thut Oy must tull ye as wull, as ye're kin."

Artha rapped the butt of her spear on the marble floor. A joinking shot through Morgan's bones.

"Whut Oy'm sying, ter be brief," continued the witch, turning to the body of the whorsepipple, "is thut our fair Morgan is no son of Old John the Woodcutter. But we all knew thut, din't we? But whut sye ye to Morgan being the son o' King John the Good, eh? Ye thought o' thut too, eh? Noo ye're probly not going ter loike whut Oy'm goin' ter say, but ye'll just hev ter excuse an owld lidie. The truth o' matter, accordin' ter the world-pebbo (which does not lie) is thut our fair Morgan is none other than the wee bouncing bastard of Reisenalb the Dwarf, or Lindenbane as he 'as coom ter be calt."

Morgan's mouth dropped open as it had never done before.

"Hah!" snorted Artha. "How can that be? You said yourself that Queen Ygena was Morgan's mother. And Morgan and I are twins to boot!"

"Noo doon't think thut Oy'm not glud ye ast thut very question, for Oy din't really know how to bring it up mesowf. But as ye ware so good ter ast, Oy'll return the fiver with the answer. It's all 'istory noo, but it seems that oncet upon a toime there ware a peasant maid calt Oygena whut ware the truly betrothed of Reisenalb, one ambitious young dwarf about the Black Forest. Things happened as things do and then Oygena met the king. And it seems as wull, by virtue of hetero-fecundational pregnancy our fair Morgan is 'arf-dwarf as wull as 'arf-twin to Artha o' the Pink Nippo who, by legal standards is the one and ownly 'eir to the throne of a kingdom whut no longer exists and fer all Oy knoo, never existed at all!"

"I've heard enough of your blathering, you ugly old whore!" screamed Artha. "I'll teach you to open your big fat yap!"

She drew the spearhead back beside her ear with such force that her foremost leg lifted off the ground. Uncoiling in the wink of an eye, Artha hurled the golden spear pointblank at the old woman's breast. In the next split-second, the weapon froze among the black beads and silks as if it had bitten into a block of ice. For a split second more, nothing in the banquet hall moved, drew breath or thought. Then . . .

"Hee hee hee," the old crone cackled. "Oy do believe ye've missed yer mark, me sweet pal Artha." The Witch of Agnesi hobbled back two steps. There where she had been only the moment before hung the golden spear upon the air. It floated like a twig on a still pool of water, gently bobbing and turning with the waves.

As stiff as an enraged bolt stood Artha. Her fists were doubled at her hips. "Off with her head!" she barked.

At that command Luigilot, the greasy scimitar gripped in both hands, slid out of the shadows and rushed up behind the old hag. No one, least of all the Witch of Agnesi, expected this sudden turn of events.

SWAP!

The surprised head jumped from the shoulders of the witch's body. Spewing blood and gore from its severed neck, the head spun around and around in the air before it came toppling to the stone floor. Bonkety-bonk it bounced and rolled until it came to rest upright upon the carpet before Morgan's dinnerplate.

A hush stilled the hall. There in the centre of the floor stood Luigilot staring at what he had done. The humpbacked body did not fall, oddly enough, but congealed in the position it was in when the scimitar had fallen. The body just stood there, seemingly unaware of its loss. One of its hands was gnarled yet about the rain-orb while the other, as if groping after a lost train of thought, was poised in mid-air.

From beneath its black ropey hair, the mottled old head of the witch grinned hideously up at Morgan. A hint of black liquid hesitated at the corner of her mouth, then trickled in fits and starts down her chin, dodging the stubbly growths as it went.

"Oowit's all one ter me if ye want ter ill-use an owld lidy loike mesowf, but it's bad manners ter do so. The tongue thut spikes the truth will alwys be pulled oot at the roots, so they sye. But if ye would be kind enow ter dismiss me 'onorabbly loike a lidy should be, Oy'll be tyking up me body and hying me home again."

Morgan could not move. Melodee, at his side, stared out from behind her hands which were pressed to her mouth. The whorsepipple were in much confusion.

The witch's lips rounded around a shrill whistle. At this, her body broke into motion: the free hand rose to scratch its head in bewilderment, but was puzzled even more when it fell upon empty air. "Over 'ere, ye stupid owld boot!" croaked the head on the carpet.

Feeling gingerly around, the headless body fumbled here and there until it had finally located its missing head and tucked it safely under its arm.

"Noo, befowr Oy leave the wye Oy coom, Oy would loike ter take a wee speck o' yer precious toime ter sing ye a wee song thut the rain-orb sang ter me ownly last noight. It moight clarify a few points concerning the touchy topic of Good King John and his Virgin Queen." The head nodded as best it could and smiled. Its eye rolled up to its bosom. "Tike me oot ter the middo o' the floor, ye clumsy owld bucket!"

The body did so.

"Plices!" sang out the head in a high-pitched cackle.

The body took up a romantic stance, but the sight was no more than grotesque. All eyes were fixed upon the witch. When a perfect silence had fallen upon the banquet hall, the head, held under one arm, began to sing in a crackling falsetto:

A peasant maid coom droiving-o
Her bullocks with a lath;
Oop John the King coom roiding-o
Along the peasant's path.

Sty sty, me choild, Oy beg o' ye,
Sty and pass an hour;
For me ye'll sing and ye Oy'll woo
And pluck as well a flowr.

True love did bloom beneath a bush
And John the King 'e said:
Oygena fair, me blushing thrush,
In nature's wise we're wed.

Sir sir, cried she, Oy've plight me troth
To an ogre, can't ye see?
Oy've sworn an oath to 'im Oy loath,
But ye're more fair nor he.

Comm comm, me love, Oy'll fix it oop
 With 'im who forced ye so;
 'E'll lead a troop or serve the soup!
 Aroise, madame, let's go.

From yam fields low to Iryntor
 The loving pair did roide,
 Though fishwoife scald and fisher sware,
 King John took 'ome 'is broide.

Oygena Queen, so blushing fair,
 While 'erding with a lath
 Did coom a lad and lass to bear
 Along a peasant's path.

After the song, the tin shields almost shivered with the calm.

"Noo thut Oy've spoken me piece," the witch said, turning to go, "Oy'll be moving along." But then she stopped and turned back to Morgan. "Ooh, and Oy've almost forgot. "'Ere's yer plything, Morgan. Tike better care o' it than ye did the last toime. Oy can't be trubbold fetching it for ye effery toime ye loose it, can Oy noo?"

The witch tossed the rain-orb onto the floor and it bounced in slow motion like a heavy crystal ball would, but without, of course, shattering. The hall rang out with echoing shrieks. The ball came rolling to a rest at Morgan's feet.

"And noo we're friends-in-kipping, ye and me, Morgan lud," the head grinned. "Oy've givern ye the rain-orb back and ye givern me a good toime. So, Oy'm orf, Oy yam!"

With its smirking head under its arm, the body scuttled off towards the main entrance where two terrified whorsepipple swept open the double doors to let it out. But then the witch stopped and wheeled around once more.

"Oy 'ate ter kip botherin' ye, Morgan me dear lud," she said, crooking her forefinger in the air, "but Oy would loike ter tell the lidy o' the 'ouse thut Oy'm dreadful sorry ter be messin' cop her livingroom with all o' me blud. But Oy want 'er ter knoo thut it's good for the rug if she ownly cares ter rub it in wull. Ta ta, Owld Agni is orf!"

A shockingly white thunderflash claimed the Witch of Agnesi. As was the case earlier on in the evening, everyone was bowled over with blindness. A flurry of worried noise filled the silence.

Artha ran up to her spear in the air and wrenched it from its invisible supports. Her face was trembling and livid; and in the dark, her eyes seemed crossed. She fell to the floor all of a sudden, sobbing and gulping most piteously.

"It isn't true what that old bitch said!" she screamed between spasms. "It isn't! It isn't! And I'll kill anyone who says it is!"

Staring woodenly at the black ashes on the rug before him, Morgan slipped off his linden ring and placed it quietly on his dirty dinnerplate. It clinked in the hollowness of the moment. He rubbed the circlet of green skin around his finger and looked at it thoughtfully. Then he stood up and walked over to Artha. Kneeling beside her, he put an arm around her heaving shoulders and kissed her on the cheek. "It's all right," he said, "don't cry Artha. I know how you feel. It's all right."

Standing up, he announced in a voice all could hear, "I want to be alone for awhile. Melodee, could you please take care of Artha? I'm going . . ."

Artha jumped up and almost bonked Morgan's nose with the top of her head. "I'm not having that little fat-faced snip take care of me! I'm Artha the Iron Livered and I need no one, repeat, no one to take care of me!" Narrowing her tear-reddened eyes, she glowered at her half-brother before her. "Understand that? No one!"

She wiped her nose with her sleeve and turned towards the whorsepipple. "There will be a full-dress tournament in the morning and I want all the knights and ladies to be present!" Then she turned again to Morgan. "And as for you and her, I can manage just fine, thank you. Now I'm going to bed!"

Spear in hand, Artha stalked out of the double doors and vanished into the blackness of the hallway. Morgan nodded his head thoughtfully after her. Then he turned to the whorsepipple. Although his face was white, he spoke clearly and calmly.

"Carry on. I must be alone." He shook his head to the rising Melodee. Her face was sorrow itself. Picking up the rain-crb in his left hand, he walked quietly out into the night-time of the balcony.

Upon his exit, the whorsepipple did not burst into chatter as they were wont, but merely spoke in soft voices and shook their heads if they spoke at all. Luigilot slipped along the back row and out the main entrance.

There was not a smile in the house.

reappearances

The wind on the balcony was warm, but a chill hovered around Morgan as he sat on the broad marble railing and stared into the black jungle. Like the night before, the river had become still, sombre and silent. There was a heavy nothingness in the hot air.

"I understand," said Morgan to himself. "I understand now."

He understood, but not everything. The deep mysterious jungle coiled before him in testimony to that. Morgan realized he was learning things about the Land of Gore, about the old world and about himself. He looked out into the jungle which, to his mind, now conjured up notions of under-current witchcraft, of plotting, ambushes in the dark . . . And as he gazed deeper, he realized that it presented no definite object to fear.

"There's something in this new land that scares me. Perhaps just me. I don't know . . ."

The mocking laughter of a nightbird shook the air. It seemed as close as it seemed far. Morgan could not point to the bird, nor even to the tree it was sitting in. All he knew was that it was out there somewhere in the night-time of jungle, crowing and cackling at him. A chill shivered up his spine. "Perhaps a suit of armour is a good idea. I'll have to have one made."

Then he slapped at a mosquito that nipped his ear, but he missed it. The tiny bloodsucker flew away unseen into the night. In the distance a swampy hum of mosquitoes, interwoven with the warble of a frog-pond, hung as a background to thought. "I'm glad Artha's having a

tournament tomorrow. It sounds a lot safer than hunting. And that will leave a few lizards around here to eat those pesky mosquitoes."

A noisome buzzing clipped by his ear again. He waved his hand at it, but hit nothing. But then in a ray of light given off by a newly-lit banquet-hall torch, there burst into view a tiny flurry of wings.

"Oh, it's you, hummingbird," said Morgan. "I thought you were a mosquito." The little bird landed on top of Morgan's head.

"Peep peep!" It was the first time that it had spoken.

Morgan laughed. "While you're up there, little bird, you could keep an eye open for mosquitoes. That is, if you don't mind."

"Peep!"

Slipping off the rail onto his feet, Morgan realized that he still had the rain-orb in his hand. Gentle shimmers of murrey and magenta wafted out of the globe's centre and wrapped around Morgan's mind. A sudden thought possessed him. "I've got it! The rain-orb can make transformations! Perhaps I could actually make the hummingbird understand me. I could ask it questions!" Reaching up, Morgan surrounded the bird gently with his fingers and brought it down before his eyes. It peeped shrilly and he felt its tiny wings swelling strongly against the walls of his hand. "Shh, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk to you." He gripped the rain-orb tighter and closed his eyes. "Now let's see. Couplets in well-worn tetrameter, is it?"

Weave a spell round this bird that flew
So in its ear speech doth ring true.

Morgan opened his eyes and looked around. Nothing seemed to have happened, but there was a distant rumble in the sky where a storm was moving in.

"Well," Morgan gulped, "do you understand me now, bird?"

"Peep!"

"What does that mean? Yes?"

"Peep!"

"That could mean yes, couldn't it? Um, let's see," Morgan reworked the conversation substituting yeses and noes, but it was too difficult, he found. "What can I ask you now? Do you enjoy being a bird?"

"Peep! Peep!" The hummingbird struggled in Morgan's grip.

"What a fool I am!" laughed Morgan. "Imagining that I can understand a bird's peeping! For all I know, the bird is just upset because it doesn't like me holding it. But I can clear up that misunderstanding right away."

Bend the air twixt this bird and me
So peeps and mine ear do agree.

Off across the sea, a thunderbolt lanced downward to meet its twin.

"My, it seems we're in for a bit of a storm!" observed Morgan. "We had better hurry. Now tell me, little bird, something that I will understand!"

"eeYAUGH!" brayed the tiny bird.

"Mary!" exclaimed Morgan. "You're a hummingbird. Don't tell me that Lindenbane's evil spell is still upon you?"

"eeYAUGH!" said Mary sadly.

In a trice, Morgan had mumbled out a verse to counteract the spell. Out of his hand sprang Mary the mule, none the worse for wear. There she stood, surprised as he was, on the balcony floor before him. A cold breeze blew in off the sea to herald the approaching storm.

"Mary! Mary!" Morgan laughed as he hugged her around the neck. "I'm so glad to see you! So you flew through the world-storm! What a mule!"

Then the rain-orb winked like an eye. Out of the night sky, ideas came crashing down upon Morgan like an avalanche. He hung upon Mary's furry neck, unable to speak or see straight. Biting his lip, he staggered to the door of the courtroom and clung drunkenly to its frame. "The dog!" he spit out among flecks of white. "Send out the bulldog! On the double!"

The entire court, just after having regathered enough poise to function close to normal, quickly lost it again in the face of Morgan and his wild-eyed request. Melodee, patting the pillow beside her, pleaded with her big brown eyes.

"Not right now, Melodee! I haven't time! I want the bulldog! Come here boy! Come on out here." The bulldog, who had been drowsing after one or two stoups of cold guinness, staggered ungainly to its feet and padded over to Morgan. "Come on out here, boy!"

The dog waddled behind Morgan out onto the balcony. It sniffed at Mary and wagged its tail sleepily. Morgan crouched over it beside the lotus pool.

Restore this dog to proper form
That graced its soul before the storm.

A thunderjolt exploded against the white walls of Castle Moog and there before Morgan's eyes stood Old Tom. The old soldier shook himself like a dog and sneezed. The force of it nearly bowled him over backwards, but he quickly remembered his legs. Wiping a sleeve across his nose, Old Tom smiled tipsily under his fiery moustache and burped. "Oy, it's Owld Tom reporting for dooty, Owld Morgan! Glad ter be wi' ye, son. Good ter be back! I wez cemin' rather weary o' dogfud and left-overs. Urf, urf!"

"Old Tom! Well, well, well! You were the bulldog the whole time. You swam through the flood!"

"Aye, ye're bleedin' roight, yer majesty, Morgan owld boy!" The old soldier let slip another belch. "Owld Tom nearly slotted 'is owld sowf inter Divy Jones' larder, 'e did. And Oy moight sye wi' a litto 'elp from that froggy John Clod. The bleedin' 'unk o' purkle frogflesh, 'e ate me toober, 'e did! It wez me chocolate doughnut what Oy used as a life-preservant. But whatever, it wez, 'e ate it. The rotter!"

"John Clod?" asked Morgan incredulously. "Is he still alive?"

"Oy, 'e is. Very much aloive, Oy moight add. Arter eating me doughnut, he swims 'appily orf ter leave me ter the boundless ragin' ravages o' that bleedin' Lake Oygena, 'e did. The rotter!"

"Well, I'd change him back this minute," said Morgan, "if I knew that he wouldn't be in the middle of the lake or something. There's no telling what might happen to him."

"It seems ter me, Morgan me lud, if Oy may be free enough ter

speak, that John Clod is 'appier being the bleedin' frog that 'e is!"

"Happy!" Morgan gasped. "Poor Happy! He's been suffering all this while, and I've just remembered him." And before Old Tom could say "Eh what?", Morgan was off through the double glassdoors that led to the royal bedchambers.

The bedroom was dark as gloom itself, but by the hazel glow of the rain-orb Morgan found his way over to where Happy was moaning fitfully and trembling with hot and cold.

"Happy!" shouted Morgan. "I'm going to heal you!" The wounded whorsepipple, lying on the bed naked except for butter smears, did not seem to pay much attention. Holding his fingers splayed over Happy's head, Morgan gazed deep into the heart of the glowing ball.

Cool the touch of fire's finger;
Pluck out the cruel flaming stinger.

And with a rain-swept thundercrash that was enough to drive Old Tom and Mary in off the balcony, the blackened scabs on Happy's face and chest evaporated into thin air. The absence of pain hit him in the face like a brickbat.

"What happened?" asked Happy, sitting up amazed. "I feel better!" He wondered at the wholeness of his arms and legs. "Hurray! Hurray!" Happy jumped up and threw his arms about Morgan's neck. "I'm better! I'm better!" Then he danced around Mary and Old Tom.

"Boy, oh boy," thought Morgan to himself. "If running the rain-orb is as simple as this, everything is going to be a heck of a lot better!"

Old Tom was half-sitting on a dresser, fingering the fractured chamberpot that Happy had used so unsuccessfully as a helmet. "Ye'd nuvver catch the loikes of Owld Tom wanderin' about on a battlefield sportin' a thundermug! Sifety pies royal dividends." He turned the pot bottom side up and squinted at the potter's hallmark.

All of a sudden an electric vibration coursed up Morgan's arms from the rain-orb and shook him to the core. "The chamberpot!" Old Tom looked up surprised to see Morgan, eyes shut, gripping the rain-orb in both hands.

Remold the clay that fills this pot;
The secret therein please unknot.

A rainy gust of wind slapped open the doubled doors to the balcony. In rushed the tempest to rage against the huddled beings in the royal bedchamber. But not a one of them moved a finger to reclose the rattling doors. The chamberpot in Old Tom's hands had burst into a puff of porcelain smoke and there in the middle of the cloud, balancing upsidedown upon his snow-white head, wobbled Flesherton Costick. The passage of a split-second somersaulted the august old gentleman head over heels into a sitting position, his black-rimmed spectacles askew over one ear.

"Oop!" burped Old Tom behind his hand. "Oy must ter been holdin' the bleedin' pot topsy-turvey . . ."

"Ahem!" coughed the man on the floor. From his doggy face down to his argyle stockings, Flesherton Costick was smutty with the soot that the dragon's breath had left upon the pot. He fell immediately to dusting himself off and rearranging the cleaner's bob in the vest pocket of his gray-flannel suit. But he did not, however, make an effort to raise him-

self up from the cold floor. Instead he leaned back against a chest of drawers and surveyed the room through his smoked-glass spectacles. Then with dignity, he cleared his throat.

"Filthy Place! But I suppose every man Must eat a peck of Dirt before he Dies!" He looked from face to face with complete assurance.

"But then again, all Cats are gray in the Dark!"

Morgan and Happy, Old Tom and Mary all looked at each other.

"Maybe we should help him up," suggested Happy.

"Mister Costick," started Morgan. "Are you all right?"

The old man on the floor looked up abruptly. "All's well that Ends well! Let no man say Different! No Gains without Pains!"

"Don't you remember me, Mister Costick? I'm Morgan."

"Morgan? Ah yes, Morgan! Long time, no sea! Umm? Or is it the other Way around? To make any Sense, it has to be the other Way around . . ."

Morgan was about to say something, but Flesherton Costick rattled on a mile a minute about the filth in the room. He even pulled out a long flowing handkerchief and beat at his pantlegs which were, by this time, more than free of dragonsmoke.

"Oy," said Old Tom, leaning over Flesherton Costick's shoulder.

"Oy 'ate ter interroopt ye, but tis yer specs what need the cleanin', not yer trousers."

"I'll clean your glasses for you," Morgan volunteered, stepping forward. But the man on the floor slapped Morgan's hand away with the handkerchief.

"Never trouble Trouble till Trouble troubles you! Filth is filth

and Clean is clean and never the Filth will out! My trousers are filthy as I can plainly see and that's the Fudding Proof of That!"

Morgan retreated shrugging his shoulders and Old Tom tapped his temple with his forefinger. Outside, the wind whistled through the draw-bridge chains and past the tower windows. A strange singing came to Morgan's ears. Within the rain-orb, a minor storm of blacks and purples was brewing. Dark and heavy beams of light unwound from its swirling centre and, crawling out across the faces of the five friends, bound them spellfast.

"My goodness!" Happy spoke with drugged solemnity. "Look at the ball!"

The words were echoes in Morgan's ears. In fact, when he himself spoke, he thought it was someone else. "Do you for a minute suppose," he whispered with a faraway thought in his eye, "that I could bring back all those poor people that were drowned and slaughtered on my behalf?"

"With the notable Exception of the Dwarts!" thundered a voice. It was Flesherton Costick who was now standing erect, spearing his finger towards the ceiling. There was a fire in his eye. "We must keep the new land a Pure Land, pure as the Driven Snow! Kings or Beggars, we must above all remember the Catechism of our Benign and Thoughtful Elders!"

"Oh yes," nodded Morgan. He was relieved that Flesherton Costick was coming to himself again. "I know that. I wasn't going to bring back the dwarts. Stoolput, maybe. He was all right for a dwarf. He died helping me."

Flesherton Costick, at this, drew himself crustily up. "Once a

Dwart, Always a Dwart! The Only Good Dwart is a Dead Dwart!" Lip a-trembling and eagle-eye glaring, he shrivelled Morgan up in a matter of seconds. Then, a slight catch showed up in his throat. "Do we so soon forget? This Stoopul of yours, or whatever you call him, is a Dwart." He trembled some more and then burst out in self-evident truth. "Dwarts breed Dwarts and Dwart Thoughts! I will not hear of It! Beware, Beware All of a Bowlegged Dwart, a Dwart that's Tall or a Dwart that's Short! Need I say More?"

Morgan threw up his hands. "All right! You win. But who should we call back?"

"I suggest," said Flesherton Costick coolly, "that you try that unfortunate young Stalwart and Pillar of the Community that suffered so abysmally at the Stubby Fingers of the Dread Menace the night of the Secret Meeting. The Tuesday Instant, to be exact!"

Happy was growing more and more puzzled by the minute. Even Old Tom and Morgan, who had been at the meeting, looked bewildered.

Flesherton Costick frowned. "You know! The serious young Troubadour (I forget his name) that served the Bitter Pill of Social Comment with the Saccharin of Song and Dance."

"Brine Stackhouse!" Old Tom and Morgan sang out in unison.

"The very lad! Let's have him up, for Music soothes the Savage Breath and, as we all know, Fish and Company stink in three Days!

"All right," laughed Morgan nervously. He squeezed the rain-crb so hard that his knuckles whitened. "Oh, I'm so excited that I don't

know if I can even remember the right way to say the chant. What's a good rhyme for 'Stackhouse'?"

"Backhouse?" Happy volunteered.

Flesherton Costick frowned. "I prefer to find Rhymes a trifle more Decorous!"

"Oy doon't see," observed Old Tom who had somehow discovered a cooling jartle of guiness, "Oy joost doon't see whut difference it should mike, deckerous or no. A rhoyme's a rhoyme and 'backhouse' rhoymes with 'Stackhouse' better than any oother word Oy've uvver coom across!"

"Convince a man against his Will," sniffed Flesherton Costick, "And He'll be of the Same Opinion still!"

Old Tom and Flesherton Costick glared at each other while Morgan concentrated on the gently tumbling clouds of umber shot through with orange and saffron.

By the crescent moon's outback house,
Give us again Brine J. Stackhouse.

A dustspot, born of the air, exploded into fuming murk and rapidly clouded in the area contained by Morgan, Mary, Old Tom, Flesherton Costick and Happy. A skittering series of tapdancing clicks shot through the midnight air.

"Ta TA!" sang out a voice from within the haze. There in his full glory, head and all, danced the minstrel Brine Stackhouse who had died under the axe well over a world ago. He rounded off his little jig with arms outstretched, a ridiculous grin on his face.

Happy was the only one to clap. Morgan and Old Tom greeted Brine

with open mouths while Flesherton Costick squinted through his dirty glasses. Mary just bristled up her back.

The musky smoke thinned out some and Morgan noticed a subtle scar encircling Brine's neck. And what was more, Brine's hands and feet faced the other way! "That's what it is," thought Morgan to himself. "His head is on backwards!"

But that lessened Brine's big broad smile not a whit.

"Brine," gulped Morgan at last. "You're back . . . back from the dead! I'm really glad to see you!"

"You should be," the minstrel laughed. "If I wasn't myself personally, I'd be overjoyed to see me back. I hope you don't mind my head being on the wrong way. I was in a bit of a hurry to leave."

"Yes, yes," nodded Flesherton Costick to Old Tom. "Anything for a Laugh! That is, if there's a Moral in It! He's the Same Fine Fellow that I remember. A Spirited Lad, but a Good Head nonetheless!"

"Yes, yes," said Brine, nodding to the mule. With his back to Flesherton Costick, Brine looked him up and down. "And He's the Same Fat-Headed Fellow that I Remember! Only One Would Think that After Losing a Crackful of Clay, He Would've Lost a Bit of Weight!" Brine grinned full in the dog-faced dignity of the white-haired old man. "On Second Thought, Perhaps He Has!"

Old Tom and Happy snickered a bit at this, but Flesherton Costick, who was dusting off his sleeves, had not seemed to notice. Morgan was still staring at Brine with disbelief.

Apart from the obvious difference, there was another. Brine's

eyes glimmered with an unusual light. And at first glance, they seemed crossed, but they were not. It was the pupil of his left eye: it was twice the size of that of his right.

"Well," drawled Brine, "I must say in all honesty that this beats sitting on the gray beach waiting for the black barge to come in." He poked two fingers into his vestpocket and fumbled out what seemed to be a black ticket. He handed it to Morgan. "Here's a souvenir for the wife and kids. Keep it! It might come in handy one of these days."

Holding it between his shaking fingers, Morgan spelled out the white letters that were stamped upon the thick black card:

GOOD FOR ONE(1) RIDE
ON THE BLACK BARGE
(NO REFUND)

Whistling as his body headed for the hallway door, Brine sang out locking straight back, "I hope you don't mind if I take a bit of cold roast pork, but I'm famished. Being dead is a very responsible position and responsibility makes me hungry!" He winked at Old Tom and slipped out the door. "Ho ho!" Brine's laugh echoed and re-echoed down the hall. "The party can start! Here comes Brine J. Stackhouse!"

"Oy, Morgan me lud," said Old Tom as he coughed into his sleeve. "If ye'll excuse a thirsty owld sowjer, Oy'll be toddlin' orf ter the bankethall. Me and Brine moight as wull drink 'er oop as we're owld mites and prodly 'ave a stoinful o' tellin' ter do afore the dawn."

"Go right ahead, Tom," said Morgan. "But I don't see how you can even think about drinking. My stomach is killing me! I don't know

what it is, but you can all go into the hall. I'll join you in a minute. I want to think everything over first. Happy, will you show Mr. Flesher-ton Costick into the hall and introduce him around and make him comfortable? Mister Costick, if you'd just follow Happy . . ."

"Happy is the Country which has no History!" commented Flesher-ton Costick as he strutted out the door after Happy and Old Tom.

"You can stay, Mary. Let's go out on the balcony."

Although the rain had stopped, the wind was still sweeping and diving around the castle, whistling and blustering its way up the river. A great invisible hand would rake a wide swath across the water, leap up on shore and with no qualms whatsoever, bend over the trees in its path.

Morgan, his arm about Mary's neck, stared out into the howling jungle. Only between the giant gusts of wind could the whorsepipples' singing and laughter make its way out onto the balcony. The glassdoor that led to the banquet hall flashed with torchlight and the sway and jump of dancing couples.

"Hoo," sighed Morgan. "I wish there were someone I could ask . . ."

Morgan bit his lip and dropped his attention to the rain-orb waiting patiently in his hands. And he was a million miles away.

Seated upon the third step up in the banquet hall, the unusual Brine J. Stackhouse plucked away on a small-necked stringed instrument made from an empty gourd. Melodee was on his one side and Ezili on his other. They were both swaying back and forth in time to the music and

weaving their hands in the air before them. The rest of the whorsepipple were either sitting around listening or clapping or dancing around on the floor.

Then, after stilling the gentle murmurs in the shadows with a resonating chord and an abrupt change of tempo, the minstrel threw back his head towards his chest and started to sing.

I've been away an age or two
Upon a beach; my head was too.
Why was I there? I hardly knew!
It's not my type of rendezvous.

The sky was white; the sea was ink;
The sand was gray; there was no pink;
There was no tide that I could see
Nor were there waves upon the sea.

An eon came; an eon went;
I wondered who would pay my rent,
Who'd feed the bird, who'd watch the store
And then my bum grew passing sore.

I dumped the sand from out my shoe
And tried to think of things to do;
So sitting down and grain by grain,
I filled my shoe with sand again.

There was no time to please myself:
My beer was home upon the shelf.
As it's a drag just sitting there,
I figured I should take some air.

I took a walk along the shore
And when I stopped there was some more;
I left no prints that I could trace:
I'd never even left the place.

Up came a shroud without a face
And while I thought this out of place,
Without a hand it handed me
A ticket with which to sail the sea.

The black barge it is coming soon--
 Spake up the shroud--at half-past moon;
 So don't be late; don't hesitate;
 Get busy now and pack your freight.

Within a trice the shroud had gone,
 But soon again I gan to yawn;
 I wondered if the captain'd said--
 We'll skip old Brine: he's not quite dead.

The shroud appeared, began to prate--
 We're sorry, sir, at this late date;
 But there has been a big mistack:
 We do, sir, have to send you back.

So here I am, not three days dead;
 Success, I fear, has turned my head;
 I would have been beyond the sea
 But you, the living, were jealous of me!

The whorsepipple enjoyed Brine's singing even though his head was on backwards. They laughed and clapped so much that he decided to sing them another song or three.

"Where in the whirld is that Morgan?" asked Melodee, frowning out into the night. She rose unnoticed to her feet. "I'll go see!"

Melodee's silhouette stood framed in the doorway. Her dress, flapping at the hem, pressed her coldly back towards the light, but she did not give in. Narrowing her eyes against the wind, she barely made out Morgan leaning over the edge of the balcony beside some horselike beast. "The mule everyone was talking about," she thought. "The humming-bird-mule"

She was about to call out when Morgan, exalting the rain-orb above his head, began to chant some rhyming verse:

The worlds diverse, o rain-orb, scan
And conjure up the wise old man.

Her ears heard the words, but Melodee was not sure that they had. Then Morgan's hands blushed pink, then white, then disappeared. The globe flared up. It flushed bright, then brighter--so bright that the little whorsepipple had to look away. Nothing was visible save the white light, the swelling light that was more than all the suns, all the stars.

Shrieking naked in the untimely light, nightbirds forgot their midnight routines while daybirds, in tree and river-reeds, broke in blind panic from the comfort of their nests, broke squawking and stumbling towards the lake. A distant leaf upon a distant shrub curled up and bleached, and against it and nature's will, became a pearl.

A wail--not of sorrow, nor of pain, nor of anything--rose across the sea and carried high above the castle, rushing inland, stilling the quick.

The wane had to come. There was nothing else, no more.

The dazzle, contracting like a sigh, gave way to the dark again, the dark that built borders in the sky, the dark that drove everything inward, the dark that made the invisible invisible again.

Dwindle, dwindle. The rain-orb was a dying blue ember, shrinking and shrinking, but never disappearing--a glow with a blindspot to define its centre.

Then the black . . .

Melodee heard nothing. Nothing but the wind. The wind soughing through the spearhead grass along the shore of the Nar.

"Morgan!" she cried into the night. But the wind seemed to shove her words back. "Morgan! Come on in out of the cold! I'm freezing just standing here in the doorway!"

The mule looked at her first. Then Morgan himself, his face pallid as the moonlight that had drained away before the storm, turned around. His eyes were hollow as the night sky, his mouth a deep pit of anguish. He shook his head and stumbled away from the railing.

"He didn't show . . ." he gasped. "The old man . . ."

"What's the matter, Morgan? What happened?"

"He didn't show . . . The only one . . . didn't show . . ."

Morgan wobbled sideways towards the lotus pool.

Melodee's hands pressed against her mouth. She forgot the cold, the wind, the light . . . One leg having shot down into the pool, her king collapsed and lay still as death in front of her.

All her thoughts dwelt upon getting Morgan into bed as quickly as possible.

chivalry waxes strong

The sun had scarcely hinted at creeping down the river when there came a tap tap tap on the royal bedchamber door.

Silence.

Then tap tap tap again.

Melodee sat up in bed. She was about to ask Morgan if he had heard a noise when, looking at his sorry back, she remembered. Quietly she slid out of bed and tiptoed across the stone-cold night-dim floor.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

"I'm coming," whispered Melodee. "I'm coming!" She opened the door a crack and Artha's face knifed in.

"Hi," she whispered. She seemed out of breath. "Is Morgan awake?"

"No. Come in. It's freezing!"

Artha slid into the room. She had a cream-white jacket thrown over her shoulders. "You should put something on instead of just running around stark naked." She bustled past Melodee and made her way over to the bed where Morgan was still fast asleep.

"Morgan's sick!" explained Melodee in a hush. She sat down on the bed between Morgan and Artha. "He collapsed on the balcony last night."

"Really? Did he have much to drink?"

"No. Hardly anything all night. But haven't you heard about the reappearances . . .?"

Artha nodded. "Ezili told Luigi. But I have to see Morgan whether he's sick or not. This is a matter of life and death!"

"Well . . . I really hate to wake him. He was throwing up all over the place."

"I thought I noticed when I first came in."

Putting her hand on Morgan's bare shoulder, Melodee found that it was practically ice-cold. She hesitated, then shook him gently. "Morgan, wake up. Artha's here to see you."

"Omm? Waza maza haza? Grunk!" Morgan rolled over to face the two girls beside his bed. Forgetting, he sat up quickly. But then his sickness came spinning in on him. "Oog . . .arg! I feel crappy!"

All around him in every sense, the room wowwed and wizened. First big, then small. There was a galaxy of pink Melodees and pale Arthas, then a pinpoint of dry-ice piercing into the base of his skull. The sound of the sea roared and howled in his ears, but it was the sound of silence.

Gradually focusing, Morgan caught glimpses of the girls looking at him, at each other, of Artha standing black and white before him, of Artha sitting beside Melodee, of the jarring contrast. Artha was talking, he knew, but where was he? "Bucket of nails . . . bucket of nails . . ." The thought plagued him.

" . . . and so, I came to apologize to the two of you for being such a bastard last night. I'm sorry, but I just got carried away. That horrid old witch mouthing all sorts of hideous things, whether they were true or not. I think you should pass a law against witches, I really do. Or something like that."

"Which witch?" fumbled Morgan. He knew that Artha was talking to him about something familiar, but for the life of him, he could not put his finger on it.

"The Witch of Agnesi! Remember last night?"

"Oh, ya ya ya!" Morgan partially lied. The name rang a bell and he was waking up a bit now. Everything was so difficult. "I remember, The Witch of Agnesi . . ."

"But I didn't come to bitch about witches," Artha rattled on at an unbelievable rate. "What I came for was to ask you to bring back Gobble and a few dwarfs so we could have them make us some better equipment. The tournament is coming up in the morning and the knights don't have a thing to wear!"

Clearing his throat, Morgan sat up against the polished bedstead before he answered. Across the room, Melodee was piling up fresh logs in the fireplace in an effort to warm up the room. "I was thinking that a suit of armour might not be such a bad idea myself. I could call up Gobble as soon as I get up enough strength. It's so hard on me. I really feel rotten."

"Do you suppose," pressed Artha, "that you could manage to work up enough energy to call up just Gobble, Nespul and Blung. It's a shame if we don't have proper equipment for the tournament. How would it look? And someone might get hurt!" Her eyes shone black and she gripped Morgan's arm with an iron hand. "This thing with Happy would never've happened if he'd had a decent suit of armour!"

"That's what I was thinking too."

"Well?" asked Artha eagerly. "Do you suppose you could call them up right away?"

"In the middle of the night?"

"Hell! They won't mind! I'll call them up myself if you show me how."

Scratching vigorously, Morgan shook his head. "Bring me the rain-orb. Where is it, Melodee?"

Melodee started towards where the rain-orb was sitting on a glass-topped table in the middle of the room; but Artha, legs flashing white under her jacket, jumped up and grabbed it first. She hurried it back to Morgan.

The ball seemed to be sleeping. Gray clouds revolved lazily within it, but when Morgan took it in his hands, it winked awake. Warm orange and yellow glows filled the room.

"Let's see now," mumbled Morgan. "I must think up a rhyme." Resting his forehead on his fist, he narrowed his eyes and stared for a minute at the white sheet draped over his stomach. Then he looked up.

From where'er the dwarfs have been flung
Send us Gobble, Nespul and Blung.

A cramp seized Morgan's mind and body. Convulsions hit him like cannonblasts. Dropping the rain-orb, he slumped back onto his feather-pillow and never even noticed the three pillars of smoke that whirled out

of the marble. The smoke evaporated soon enough and there stood Gobble in the middle of the floor between Nespul and Blung. The dwarfs glanced around the room at the people and furnishings, but none of them seemed overly amazed.

"Greetings, King Morgan," smiled Gobble, "from the Land of the Dead."

"Hello, Gobble," smiled Morgan weakly. He was still reeling from the blow. "Glad to see you again."

Gobble took his time looking from the broad blazing fireplace to Melodee, and then from the well-made furniture to the balcony doors. He nodded slowly at each thing and when he was finished, he turned to Morgan. "I suppose I have to say that I'm very pleased to see you again." He walked over and plunked himself down on the edge of the bed, his back to Artha. "Well, well, well! We've finally got you where we want you, haven't we?"

"And where's that?" asked Morgan. Whirling discs were still buzzing and tilting in his head, threatening to break out through the skull-wall.

"On the throne, of course. Where did you think? In bed?"

Nespul and Blung laughed. The castle echoed with the deep and quiet vibrations. Melodee huddled closer to the fire and Artha jumped up and stalked around to the foot of the bed to make herself a better seat.

"Feeling a bit punk, hey?" asked Gobble with a knowing grin. He glanced around at Artha and Melodee. "Too much sun? Guinness? Or just too much exercise?"

"No . . .," drawled Morgan. "It's the rain-orb, I think. I've been seeing too much of it lately." He stopped, noticing that Gobble was toying with it. "Er, do you know about the rain-orb?"

Gobble fixed Morgan with his unbalanced eyes. "Every dwarf knows everything about the cosmowart. But what I know is that you need a Magic Pill to perk you up."

"A Magic Pill?" Morgan's question bounced off Gobble's back. The dwarf was beckoning to his friend Nespul.

"Have you any thorazine in your bag?" Gobble asked.

Nespul pulled out a small leather pouch from under his shirt and rummaged around in it. "Sure thing." He came up with two black bottles. "What do you want: pill or suppository?"

Gobble glanced around the room. "Pill."

Shaking an oblong two-tone pellet from the smaller of the two bottles, Nespul handed it to Gobble and proceeded to pack everything up again.

"Open up, King Morgan!" Grinning broadly, Gobble poised the pill above Morgan's head. "Bombs away!" The pill tumbled end over end into Morgan's mouth and disappeared. "Swallow it."

The room was silent as it watched to see what was going to happen. Within a trice, the wrinkles on Morgan's forehead smoothed over. The missing colour crept back into his cheeks and his long and haggard face melted away its angles to bubble into a fresh and happy smile.

"Wow!" gasped Artha. "Those Magic Pills sure work wonders!"

"Every time," agreed Gobble.

Morgan sat up and smiled even more. "Just what the doctor ordered."

Gobble laughed. "I'll send you a bill in the mail, as soon as you organize a postal service in this wilderness of yours!"

Artha and Melodee laughed with relief and the dwarfs chuckled.

"Gobble," Morgan continued, changing his tone, "Artha and I were wondering if you would mind putting together some armour for her tournament in the morning."

Twitching his pan-shaped mouth around this way and then that, the dwarf looked out at the rising sun. "Well, you certainly don't give us much time! Even dwarfs have to have a bit of time if they're going to do anything. But if you show us to the cellar and a pile of metal, I suppose we could throw together some makeshift suits . . . if we really sweated. Just how many would you want?"

"Fourteen?" said Artha.

The dwarfs winced in unison.

"Let me put it this way," said Gobble. "How many do you need?"

"Well, I suppose . . . if need be . . ." Artha counted on her fingers. "I guess we could get by with eight. But it would have to be rather a small tournament."

Standing up, Gobble snapped his fingers. Nespul and Blung snapped to the ready. "Show me to the cellar and we'll see what we can do."

Artha wrapped the jacket tighter around her shoulders and headed for the door. "Follow me. There's a lot of scrap down there already, but there's more in the junkyard if you need more."

Gobble, Nespul and Blung filed out the door after Artha and disappeared into the darkness of the hall. As soon as they were out of sight, Melodee came scampering back from the fireplace and crawled back under the covers with Morgan. She was warm on one side and freezing cold on the other.

"It's a couple of hours to the tournament," said Melodee. "And besides, whorsepipple always sleep in on Cipherday!"

Morgan pulled a troublesome corner of blanket out from under him and wiggled around until he was more comfortable. "That pill really fixed me up in a hurry," he said. "We're sure lucky to have Gobble back!"

Ta ra ta ra ta tata ta TA!

The trumpet sounded loud and clear along the sandy riverside road.

There were whorsepipple everywhere: on the grass, on benches and chairs, under umbrellas and, of course, just milling around the refreshment booth. Everypipple was wearing his brightest and flashiest outfit. The road was a swarming patchwork of colour. Ruffled blouses, summerfrocks and cottonprints mingled with teeshirts, bellbottoms and the occasional sombrero. Even little Ezili, who rarely ever wore anything other than a smile, could be seen trotting around giggling in a pale green shift.

Horses stamped and snorted in the livery-tents at the edge of the festivities. Giggles and shouts bobbed up and down on the happy buzz that floated in the air along the northshore of the Nar.

Morgan looked around. The whorsepipple had been up early by the looks of things. Tents had been set up, drinks prepared and the refreshment stand, which also provided the foundation for the royal booth in which Morgan was sitting, had been built especially for the tournament. It was hung with the brightest lengths of red, white and blue satin that the whorsepipple had been able to lay their hands upon.

Melodee, on his right, was all in pink; her skin seemed to blush. To Morgan's left sat Gobble and Artha. Gobble was decked out in the same oversize clothes that Morgan had seen him in that night long ago when the dwarf had found him. But Artha was fresh in a white crochet dress and matching sandals. A black bandeau peeked through the loosely knit summer-wool of her garment, but was hardly noticeable as her dark black hair whipped constantly about her busy shoulders.

The dwarfs had been busy too. There in a row on a roadside bench waited eight lumps of iron and steel. These were the Knights Aspirant and they all looked vaguely the same. The eighth suit of armour, however, seemed to have required an additional amount of material and an extra bit of workmanship. It sported, as well, a jartle of gueness in its either gauntlet. This Knight Aspirant resembled Old Tom in size as well as deportment.

"Morgan!" There was a tug at Morgan's coat-tail. "Morgan!" He turned around to find Happy's face peering over the back of the refreshment booth.

"What is it, Happy?"

"My horse! He's run away. He's probably off in the pasture, but it'd take an hour or so to fetch him. What should I do?"

"Um . . .," thought Morgan out loud. "Why don't you ride Mary? She's around somewhere and wouldn't mind. In fact, she'd probably like it."

Happy's face brightened. "I never thought of that! I'll go find her." And then the whorsepipple disappeared down the ladder.

High and clear the trumpet purpled once more.

Morgan stood up and gripped the two-by-four railing before him. "Let the tournament begin!" The crowd roared joyfully. He saluted them with an open jartle of ice-cold gueness and then sat down to enjoy himself. "There's quite a crowd," he said to Melodee. "I didn't know there were so many whorsepipple."

"Oh yes," she answered. "They've come from near and far. Every-pipple enjoys a party!"

They turned their attention to the action unwinding before them. Clanks, rattles and clinks, as well as the occasional squeak of metal on metal, rose out of the pit area where two knights were being readied for the contest. Through a tangle of heads, hands and hats, Morgan saw the first joust was to be between Happy, who had found Mary, and Luigilot.

The albino, with next to no assistance, had swung himself up onto his dashing white charger and was quietly watching a jumble of whorsepipple trying to lift Happy onto Mary's back. The weight of the armour was almost too much for the whorsepipple and their fine-boned hands. And Happy

did not help matters by just rolling limply around inside his new iron suit. But finally the deed was done and the two knights rode to their separate positions on either end of the riverside road.

Artha stood up and put both hands on the railing before her. "Clear the road!" cried out Artha. She waved a long banner of red silk back and forth as if she were erasing the whorsepipple that were still milling about in the middle of the road. "Clear the road! The tournament has begun!"

She turned around and sighed. For the first time that day Morgan was truly amazed. Never before had he seen Artha looking so beautiful, so strikingly black and so palely white. The only colour about her was in her lips, her lips which were red as rosebuds.

"The sun is so bright!" She sighed again and shaded her face with a white hand. "My eyes . . ."

"Aren't you feeling very well," asked Morgan, leaning forward. He was feeling so good that he found it difficult to believe that anyone else, especially Artha, could be poorly that fine CIPHERDAY morning. "do you think you should go lie down? I'll walk you to the castle."

"No. It's all right. I'm just a bit dizzy. It's gone now." She threw back her dark hair and bit her lip.

"Maybe Gobble has an aspirin," suggested Morgan.

Within a wink, the dwarf produced a small white pill. He handed it to Artha. "Take this. But I don't think it'll help much."

Artha looked at the aspirin on her palm and then at Morgan. "I can't swallow this without water."

"Wash it down with guinness," said Morgan. He handed her his jartle.
"Thanks."

Towards the sea sat Happy on Mary, blinking into the sun. Constantly adjusting his nuts and bolts, he would have to pull off his metal glove, do whatever he pulled off his glove to do, and then pull it back on again. Under this jiggling load, Mary stood rather placidly munching a few strands of grass that some pippie had given her.

And at the other end of the runway was Luigilot, high upon his white charger, coolly waiting out the minutes to the combat. His armour seemed highly polished and he was resplendent under the sun which winked and flashed across his shoulders.

Separate parties of armourers scurried up to their knights and outfitted them with long wooden lances tipped with blunt points of brass. Heraldic shields also appeared that bore crests the knights themselves had painted on that very same morning. Luigilot's escutcheon was a tiny picture of himself, pure white except for dark glasses; and Happy's, a brightly colored sailbark upon a sea of blue.

The roadside was lined with two walls of pink and excited faces, all bobbing and craning at the neck.

"Knights and Ladies," began Artha, who was feeling better or at least well enough to speak in a loud voice. "We are gathered here today in honor of our new king who has done, as we must all admit, a fair job, a pretty good job of keeping us happy. Today, thanks to him and his rain-orb, we are going to witness a fine spectacle never before seen in this world: a tournament! A tournament is good clean fun which separates the

men from the boys. There will be seven separate jousts altogether and the winner of each will receive a different colored banner from the Damsel Presidante, that's me.

"Now for the first joust, we have here, competing for the red scarf and the Position Incumbente, two fine fellows. On my right, weighing in at 97 pounds (dripping wet) and bearing the Jolly Sailbark, Sir Happy of the Nar!"

There was a wild cheer from the whorsepipple.

"And on my left, continued Artha, "weighing in at 145 and bearing the Man in Shades, Sir Luigilot of the Lagoon! Let's really hear it for these boys!"

Again the crowd exploded into noisy appreciation.

"Now before I take up any more of your time, I would like to acquaint Happy and Luigi with the Tournament Rules." Artha cleared her throat and shouted just a little bit louder. "Knights Aspirant, Sir Hap and Sir Luigilot, I, Damsel Presidante, entreat you both to fight fair, break clean and if your opponent comes to be unhorsed, you are to retire to your end of the runway and cease all combat! Now is that clear? Before we begin, are there any questions?"

The whorsepipple looked from each to each. Luigilot shook his head with quiet deliberation. Happy fidgetted a bit and then from his end of the runway, his tinny voice piped up. "What does the Damsel Presidante recommend for chafing breasplates?"

Happy's question struck the assembly as hilarious. All the standing whorsepipple convulsed almost to collapsing and in fact, a few did.

Brine Stackhouse, whose body was sitting with its feet towards the river under a butterfly parasol, fell backwards off his portable canvas chair and rolled about on the grass beside the road. The minstrel's head faced one way and laughed uproariously, while his body shook violently facing the other way. He continued on like this for a good two minutes after everyone else had stopped laughing.

And when Brine's amusement subsided to random chuckles and sniggers, Artha whipped the silk scarf up and then down.

Ta TA ta TA ta TATATA!

"Let the First Joust begin!"

The white charger's hooves shot up storms of hot sand. Mary, with a minor lurch, started trotting briskly forward. Happy bounced uncomfortably along behind her proud head. His lance wobbled and weaved this way and that in the hot sunbaked air above the runway.

"Go, Happy, go!" Morgan found himself cheering with the seaward half of the crowd.

"Go, Luigi, go!" shrieked Artha with the inland half.

A churning cloud of dust sizzled up from the white charger's fetlocks and boiled down upon Happy and Mary. Luigilot, galloping at full tilt, passed the royal booth, the halfway mark, holding his lance as firm and straight as an arrow in flight.

THONK!

Luigilot caught Happy under his shield, full in the stomachette, and drove him straight backwards for a quarter of the runway's length

until gravity regained its sway and pulled the flying mass down to the sandy ground with a heavy BUMP!

The yellow plague of dust that trailed the victor's horse bore down on the unhorsed Happy and completely obscured the field of contest. Morgan, Artha and Melodee joined the hacking and the coughing of the whorsepipple. Sporadic cheers and hollers filtered through the small duststorm.

As the individual dustparticles found their slow and separate ways back down to the roadside, it became apparent to all that Luigilot of the Lagoon was the winner; and Happy, who was sprawled at the end of a haphazard path of nuts, bolts and loose sections of armour-plating, was the uncontested loser. Luigilot, raising his visor to reveal his pale face and dark glasses, rode up to the royal booth through a pawing and joyful swarm of whorsepipple.

Artha bent over the railing. "It gives me great honour," she began, "to bestow on you, Sir Luigilot of the Lagoon, this token of my esteem, the red ribbon of victory!" The crowd cheered wildly as Artha leaned over as far as she could to tie the red scarf to the spike jutting out from Luigi's bowed scalpolio. Morgan put his foot firmly on the flowing hem of Artha's dress as he could see in his mind's eye her tumbling down onto Luigilot if she happened to slip.

"Thank you," mumbled Luigilot.

Morgan removed his foot as Artha was no longer in danger of falling. He saluted the victor with his guiness. "Here's to good luck in the second!"

"Thank you, your majesty. I accept your good wishes graciously, but I really don't need good luck." And with that, Luigilot wheeled his white charger about and returned to his end of the runway.

"Luigi is right," explained Artha to Morgan. "He's good. He doesn't need good luck. I taught him to joust myself." She turned back to the crowd. "Knights and Ladies! Could I have your attention please! There will be a five-minute intermission between bouts. So get your refreshments now!"

A hundred or more whorsepipple rushed forward to scoop up a cupful of raspberry nectar or pineapple punch or just grab one of the jartles of chilled guiness waiting in a tub of ice under the royal observation booth.

And so ended the First Joust that fine CIPHERDAY morning.

Artha was sitting between Gobble and Morgan busily running a comb through her hair. Tossing her head this way and that, she finally brought her long black tresses to fall evenly across her white shoulders.

Gobble leaned across in front of Artha and tugged at Morgan's sleeve. "I think," he began, a businesslike look on his face, "that if we make leather jerkins to go under the armour, the knights will be more comfortable. Happy was right. Those tin pants do pinch."

"How do we go about getting the leather?" asked Morgan.

"Leather is cowhide!" announced Artha who was matter-of-factly patting her hair into place again. "I'll send out a party after the tournament. I saw a herd of cows down by the creek yesterday."

Melodee put her hand on Morgan's arm. "Poor Happy," she sighed when he turned around to her. "I've never seen him so down at the mouth. Look!"

Morgan glanced from face to face in the congestion below until he came across Happy's. He was standing all alone, half-stripped of armour, with a punchglass in his hand. No one was talking to him and he shuffled about uncomfortably, glancing into this face and that. But he always looked quickly away if anyone happened to notice him.

Morgan stood up and leaned over the railing. Above the din of the refreshment counter, he shouted out, "Happy! Happy! Up here!" He waved his hands.

Happy finally located the source of the voice calling his name and looked up with a sad question upon his face.

"I thought you did very well, Happy! I can't imagine how horribly I would have done against Luigi. He's too much for either of us."

Nodding his head and smiling a bit, Happy raised his glass to Morgan and Morgan did likewise with his jartle. But then a screen of streamers, hats and tall orange plumes imposed themselves between and the sad half-dressed knight was lost to sight. "Poor Happy," said Morgan, returning to his place beside Melodee. "I feel so sorry for him. Nobody wants to talk to him. They're all like a bunch of kids down at the other end of the runway idolizing that Luigi character. Poor Happy! It's only a game and Luigi is twice the size of him. He shouldn't feel so bad!"

"And," added Melodee, "he's twice the snob. I remember once when I was going out with him . . ."

But Artha cut off her story by standing up and bellowing at the knights and ladies. "The second engagement," she explained, "is to take place forthwith. Off the runway everybody! To your places! You'll have another intermission between every joust. Now let's get this show on the road!"

The road was quickly cleared and the liverypipple were busy equipping Luigi's second challenger with a lance and a shield. Soon everything was ready.

"The second joust," Artha announced, "will involve, of course, the defending champion, Sir Luigilot of the Lagoon, and . . ." Artha paused to read from a ragged piece of paper in her hand. ". . . and a Sir Nobbili of Wobbili, who has come down all the way from Lake Ygena to challenge the Moog! Let's really hear it for Sir Nobbili. Let's give him a real welcome!"

The whorsepipple burst into happy applause and Sir Nobbili nodded.

"You are both acquainted with the rules, so let the joust begin!" Artha waved an orange bandanna to signal the trumpetter, and with a brassy blast the second contest was on.

Sir Nobbili did not fare much better than Happy, but he, at least, survived one of Luigilot's lightning passes by deflecting a lancethrust with his lucky shield. Luigi, having missed his mark, whipped his mount around so quickly that the poor beast almost stumbled over sideways in the sand. He rushed back to bat Sir Nobbili smartly down before that visiting knight had a chance to turn his horse halfway around.

And it was in this fashion that morning gave way to noon, noon to afternoon, and a succession of whorsepipple, both big and small, gave way to Sir Luigilot. Time and time again that knight trotted his white charger out of a choke of dust to receive the honorary ribbons, red through to indigo, from Artha's hand.

Then at last, there was one ribbon left, the purple one, and the crowd was in the gayest and noisiest mood that the Moog had ever seen. For a penultimate treat, Brine Stackhouse had agreed to sing the clamouring whorsepipple a song. "It's not much of anything," he said, tuning up his gourd. "I just made it up to take my mind off my sore bum!"

In memory of your future
 I'll sing a song to you
 Of what will where and when it will
 And how the morn will who.
 Back-a-day, fore-a-day,
 Cockle dee doo;
 I'll sing a song
 But that's all that I'll do!

A suit of steel went riding-o
 Its master's metal horse;
 Asleep at home the master was
 In bed between the wars.

The suit sang to its own content
 A lovesong pure and clear;
 It ambled on to Nowhereville,
 Alone inside with Cheer.

The metal steed climbed up and up
 To top a cresting hill;
 When spied its eye a rum surpry
 That froze it stalking still.

The nothing-eye through visorslit
 Did take its time to view
 An armed knight upon a horse
 Against a sky of blue.

Down down the horse and armour fell,
 Up pricked the other knight
 Until the horses' noses met
 And splashed all out of sight.

A golden fire sat on the lake:
 The sun was setting low;
 "Oh where," sang out the master's voice
 "Oh where'd my war gear go?"

Back-a-day, fore-a-day,
 Cockle dee dun;
 I've sung a song
 And that's all that I've done.
 In memory of your future
 I've sung a song to you
 Of what will where and when it will
 And how the morn will who.

And with that and no explanation whatsoever, Brine J. Stackhouse dashed from the runway, through the crowd of faces to take a flying leap into the lily pads along the edge of the river. The current caught him up and carried him behind the reeds. He was last seen floating downstream on his back, his face towards the sea.

"Ho ho ho," laughed the whorsepipple who were too tickled to remark at the minstrel's unusual exit. "Ha ha ha!"

"Hoo boy," cried one of them, tears streaming down his face, "That's the funniest song I've ever heard!"

"Same here!"

"Hee hee hee!"

"Hoo hoo!"

It was a full minute before the mirth and glee allowed Artha, who was standing with her hand up for attention, to be heard. "All right. All right! We've had our song. Now for the seventh and final event of the day,

the Magenta Banner Encounter. Challenging Sir Luigilot of the Lagoon is Sir Old Tom of the Dog, a skilled and proven warrior from the Island of Tilantes. Old Tom will . . ."

"Sst!"

One attendant, with a rather horrified expression on his face, was jumping up and down in front of the royal booth trying to attract Artha's attention.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, it's just terrible, Artha. We won't be able to finish the tournament! There's something the matter with Old Tom!"

Artha frowned. "What seems to be the matter with him?" She looked over at Old Tom sitting in his suit of armour at the end of the competitor's bench. "He looks quite all right from here."

"That's only because his armour is holding him up, Artha. We just discovered that something was wrong when his turn came up. I called him to get ready, but he didn't move. So I knocked on his helmet. Still no reply. Then I opened up his visor and there he was: all curled up in a corner and fast asleep! We all tried to wake him up by banging and jiggling, but he just wouldn't!"

Artha shook her head, wrinkling her brow even more. "Haul him away! He's no good to us dead drunk!"

A team of seven whorsepipple managed to topple Old Tom, asleep in his suit of armour, over onto the ground and drag him along the sandy road towards the coolness of the castle. As he passed the royal booth, a

resonant snore escaped from his visor. Everyone laughed; but Artha, her face white and eyes flashing, whirled around upon Morgan. "Now what are we going to do?" she almost shouted. "We still have this purple ribbon to give away and there's no more competitors!"

"Maybe you could get one of the knights to ride again," suggested Morgan.

Waving the prize about in the air, Artha posed the question to the defeated knights scattered about in the crowd in various stages of undress. Not a one of them seemed to jump at the chance.

"Happy," asked Artha, "don't you want to try for the Magenta Banner? It's the best one, you know."

Happy slowly shook his head. "Thanks, but no thanks. I still feel a bit bruised up."

"Don't any of you other knights want to ride against Luigilot?"

The knights who had not already taken care to hide behind their neighbour's hats and feathers mumbled out noes and shuffled their feet.

"Well," said Artha brightly, "we'll throw this thing wide open so everybody can have a chance. Does anyone out there in the crowd, whether big or small, fast or slow, want to challenge Sir Luigilot? It's a nice purple ribbon!" She looked around at all the faces.

No one was smiling. The whorsepipple simply stared back. The first silence of the day bounced stonily off the castle in the middle of the river-mouth. Luigilot paced his white steed up and down the runway, looking neither to one side nor to the other. Up and down. Six brightly colored prizes streamed from his helmet as he passed.

"Isn't there anyone brave enough to challenge Sir Luigilot of the Lagoon to just one little joust?" Amazement was written all over Artha's face. "We have to get rid of this ribbon! Doesn't anyone want to win this nice purple prize?"

Artha waited for an answer, but all that she heard was a lily-trotter on the farbank of the Nar cawing for its mate.

"For the last time, is there anyone, man, whorsepipple or beast, that is brave enough to try for this glorious token?"

"I AM!" boomed a metallic throat from out of the river.

All eyes, shining with relief and curiosity, wheeled around to see the challenger and what such a brave soul would look like. Cut of the river splashed a huge box of a beast, muddy as the riverbottom and twice as ugly. Upon its broad back was mounted a fully armed knight, arrayed in green.

"Eek!" shrieked one whorsepipplette.

"A green knight!"

"From under the river!"

Melodee leaned close to Morgan's ear. "And it's riding on a hipplepotamus!"

As this fearsome hipplepotamus clambered out of the riverside muck, streams of swampy riverwater drained out of the many small holes and joints in the green knight's iron boots and leg armour. On his one arm sat a stout green shield, a purple frog emblazoned across its front; and under his other, rested a sturdy green halberd. It was blunt-nosed, but

with enough of a sharpened flange dropping down from its shaft to make Morgan think that the whole affair looked pretty much like a giant can-opener.

The astounded crowd of whorsepipple divided in front of this monstrous combination of metal and beast. The green knight, a frond of seaweed plastered across his breastwork, guided his mount between the two ogling halves of the crowd and across the dusty roadway to the royal booth.

"What make you here, green knight?" demanded Artha.

"I come," reverberated the metallic voice from behind the unopened visor, "to speak with he who pretends to the Kingship of Gore!" A tingling echo clung to the air. "He and he alone!"

Morgan cleared his throat and stood up. "I'm King Morgan. What seems to be the matter?"

The green knight straightened up with a clank. "King Morgan," began the knight, "I bring tidings from the true King of Gore, the Purple Wonder, the High among the Low, who bids me say unto you, Quote: ze worse-peepell are but a blemeesh upon ze broad back of ze Land of Gore! And zat voyou who maks zem keeng ees a presumptueux usurpateur and a feenk and wat's more, heez seestair ees fat around ze heeps! Endquote." The knight coughed. "I hope I got the accent and the big words right. I practiced them over and over all the way here."

"Well, I understand what you were trying to say," nodded Morgan. "Won't you climb down and have a gueness?"

"Uh, no! thanks," hesitated the green knight. "I'm still on duty. King Clod wouldn't like it . . ."

Morgan was about to follow this up when Artha pushed him aside and stood, arms akimbo, in the middle of the royal booth. "I am not fat around the hips!" she growled. "Just who do you think you are, you big dumb ape, wandering around our kingdom and calling me fat?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," stuttered the knight. "I was just following orders. I didn't mean to hurt anybody's feelings."

"I think guys like you need to be taken down a peg or two. You said you were brave enough to take on Luigi. Are you?"

The green knight clinked his shoulderplates. "I guess so. I just came to deliver a message, that's all."

Artha waved the purple banner in the air. "All right, you whorse-pipple. Clear the track! We've got another joust going here! Luigi! Get ready to teach this loudmouth a lesson in courtesy. Knock him pizzle-end up!"

And with no further delay, the green knight brought his monstrous mount about and took up his place at the opposite end of the runway from Sir Luigilot of the Lagoon.

"Boy, oh boy," whispered one whorsepipple to his neighbour. "A real fight this time!"

"No fooling around here!"

"Boy, oh boy!"

"That fellow in green is outfitted quite royally," commented Gobble quite calmly. "I wonder who made his arms?"

"Shush!" hissed Artha. "I'm going to wave the ribbon!"

She did and the trumpet blared. The two knights charged full tilt, one against the other. Every whorsepipple strained his neck forwards to catch every precious fragment of the action.

"Hurrray for Luigi!" screamed the crowd. "Go, go, go!"

Sitting on the edge of her chair, Artha bit her lower lip and beat the heels of her hands together. "Go, Luigi baby, go!"

The knight in white, commanding the swifter mount, closed up the gap while the knight in green contented himself with the lumbering pace of his hipplepotamus.

BooWANG!

The two champions met, the lance of each upon the other's shield. For a split second the undecided action froze.

Then as gently as gossamer trailing in the wind, Sir Luigilot of the Lagoon rose from the white back of his charger at the end of the green halbert and wafted high above the jungle skyline. Slowly, but slowly he unwound end-over-end to complete an ungraceful loop-the-loop. Arms and legs a-windmilling, he gradually came crashing back to earth followed by a disconnected array of lancesplinters, dented stomachplates, a cloven shield, an errant solleret and a helmet buried under a tumbling rainbow of silk streamers.

A howl of disbelief hit the sky. A moan of horror swept over the field of contest when the whorsepipple saw how their hero had fared.

"Oh, no!"

"Luigi's down!"

"What'll we do?"

Artha jumped to her feet and shook her fist at the green knight. Then she pounded her other fist, Magenta Banner and all, on the two-by-four railing. "Fix! Fix!" she shouted.

Tugging at her dress, Morgan tried to get Artha to sit down again. "Artha! Artha! It was a fair fight! The green knight won! That's all there is to it. The green knight won!"

Upon his placid hippopotamus, the green knight slowly pushed his way through the thronging whorsepipple, taking care not to crush a foot or a toe. "Well," he said when he arrived in front of the booth, "I guess that makes me the winner. My token, please!"

"You'll get nothing of the sort from me, you upstart!" snapped Artha. She threw the ribbon onto the floor of the booth and stomped over to the ladder, snorting like a dragon.

Morgan got up and retrieved the green knight's prize. "I'm sorry about Artha. She does get a bit upset about things like this, but I'll give you the ribbon myself." Leaning over the railing, Morgan extended the ribbon to the knight on the hippopotamus.

The green knight, however, made no sign of acceptance. His iron gloves lay one on top of the other, the two of them together on the pommel of his saddle. "Ah, we won't worry about ribbons," said the knight. "The color would only fade on the way home. I had enough fun with Sir Luigilot. I suppose I should thank him before I go."

Then the knight snapped his fingerettes. "Oh my goodness! I almost forgot. King John the Clod, the Purple Frog of the Bog, also bid me tell you that he's declaring war on the Moog. He says that the cause to be decided is the kingship of all Gore and refusal to meet him Someday Afternoon, which is tomorrow, upon the Willow Walk will result in an invasion of the Moog at a yet undecided date, perhaps Mudday or Toolday. I hope I remembered everything. I'm not very good at this sort of thing."

"So John Clod is your king, hey?" said Morgan. "How about that?"

"Yes," nodded the green helmet. "And I guess from this moment onward we're officially at war. Nothing personal, you understand!"

"Oh no," Morgan shook his head. "No offense taken. John Clod and I are old friends . . ."

The green knight shuffled around in his saddle. "Well, I guess I'll be going. I want to get back by suppertime."

"You're sure you won't stay over for a gueness?"

"No, no," the green knight laughed, holding up a gauntlet, "it's all right, thanks just the same. I have to drive."

Morgan was looking into his hand where he was carefully folding the Magenta Banner over and over. "Ya well, I guess we'll be seeing you then!"

Just as the green knight was about to leave, Artha appeared at his side, waving her golden spear under his noseguard, "All right, you big fat lunk," she snarled. "We'll show you and we'll beat you good! No one, but no one, busts up my tournaments like this! I'll see to you personally on the Willow Walk!"

"Watch it, hey?" said the green knight, trying to wave Artha's spear away. "You're going to put somebody's eye out, waving that thing around like that! Don't you know anything about spears?"

"I know more about spears than you'll ever know," said Artha, continuing to press her point, "and you'll find out tomorrow!"

"If you don't put that spear down I'm going to get mad."

At this, Artha tried to push the spearhead through one of the green knight's visorslits. Quietly placing his halbert in the halbert-holster at the side of his saddle, the knight wrapped a thick iron glove around the golden spear and wrenched it from Artha's grip. Then with calm deliberation, he folded it into a U.

"Hey!" shouted Artha. "Quit ruining my spear!"

The knight, gripping both ends, twisted it this way and that until the golden spear became a golden pretzel. He held it high for all to see and then tossed it back to Artha. "I warned you, but you wouldn't listen!"

Artha held the mess in her hands and unsuccessfully tried to straighten it out. She was snarling between her clenched teeth.

"I really must go," the knight explained as he wheeled his hippopotamus around. He almost knocked over Artha and half a dozen whorse-pipple who had crowded too close.

"Wait!" cried Morgan after the retreating green back. "Before you go, won't you tell us what knight you are?"

The green knight reined in his hippopotamus and swung around to sit almost sideways in his saddle. "Sir," issued his voice clearly from

his curbchain, "I will tell you as a knight tells a knight." With a firm, but slow iron mitt, the green victor slid open his visor.

A cry went up from the whorsepipple. One little girl fainted.

From out the depths of the green helmet there grinned the ugliest creature imaginable! Its face was a brownish-green pile of warts and where there were no warts was a thick wrinkle of yellowish-green skin. On top of its face blinked two slimy eyes the size of hens' eggs. Then all of a sudden its mouth, which stretched from eye to eye, yawned open and out shot a long red rope of a tongue. It curled around a passing gnat and whipped back in with its late afternoon snack.

"A giant toad!" screamed Melodee, hiding her eyes with her hands.

The whorsepipple fell back, leaving the field wide open.

"I am," boomed out the creature in a deep voice, "Sir Bufo of the Bog, and a giant toad at that!" With those words, the green knight saluted the whorsepipple and spurred his mount down the riverbank into the water.

"Do something, Luigi!" urged Artha. "Bite his leg! Strangle him!"

Luigi, standing in a half-demolished suit of armour, shook his head. "I'm not going to take him on again! Not with this shoddy equipment!" He held up a sadly dented brassard for all to see. "It's bad enough having to fight with this equipment, without being asked to fight with my bare hands!"

"Ooooh," growled Artha, gritting her teeth. "You men make me so mad!" Snatching a jartle which was halfway to Happy's mouth, Artha wound up and let go a fast overhand. The half-loaded missile whizzed in a straight line towards the rear of the green knight's helmet where it smashed most wonderfully with a juicy crash.

There was still an exploding halo of foam hanging in the air when the knight, submerged to the tuille, whipped around in his saddle and knifed a finger at Artha's breast. "You," bellowed out the toad, "have just pushed me too far! I'll be remembering your famous words, your promise to me of personal satisfaction. So till tomorrow, good luck!"

Then the river swallowed up the green knight and his hippopotamus. With wonder and with horror, the whole court and countryside stared at the many-sized bubbles floating on the empty surface of the harbour.

Morgan thought he caught the glint of a tear in Artha's eye, but she pressed her lips together and stalked away too soon to tell. As she passed Luigilot, she wrenched off his darkglasses and put them on herself.

"Hey, hey," cried out the albino. "You know I can't see without my glasses!" But all Luigi could do was blink pinkly after Artha who was well on her way to the bridge that led to the castle.

And as rivers flow, the green knight's memory, the many-sized bubbles, drifted out of sight behind some reeds and then there was nothing to fill the silent broadness of the Nar.

Nothing save the sometime tickle of a mating daybird, so far away, so innocently amused.

the council of war

The sun was setting on the Mool of Sean and Artha could feel a better mood creeping over her. The dark glasses had helped her through the day and now here she was making part of a small council of war sequestered away in Morgan's bedroom.

Gobble, Flesherton Costick and Happy were also there. The five of them sat around the table in the centre of the room sharing in a dinner of coldcuts left over from the evening before. Between the plates of cold pork was a map drawn by Artha with help from Happy. It showed what little they knew of the Land of Gore. On top of the map sat the rain-orb. Ultramarines, dusky purples and bloodstone played across the walls and ceilings, across the circle of huddled faces.

"I vote we zap that John Clod with the rain-orb," said Artha
"Change him into a pickle or a lilypad!"

"Well, I don't know," Morgan deliberated. "It doesn't seem fair to do that. He might drown or the frogs might eat him. Something terrible, anyway."

"But that's exactly what we want! Poot! One cut! No more trouble! We can carry on with our tournaments and nobody'd be the wiser. It's best all round!"

"We can't do that to John Clod! He fought for us against the dwarfs, don't forget. This could just be one of his jokes . . ."

"Hah," laughed Artha. "He's got about as much of a sense of humour as a meatgrinder!"

"Ahem," interrupted Flesherton Costick, who had been sitting back and nodding wisely from time to time. "I happen to side with Mistress Artha. Prevention is Better Than Cure! Why send an Army out into the Bog if it is Unneccessary?" He coughed into his handkerchief. "Besides I never did Share nor Appréciate the Social Attitudes of that Clod. And One can Never Be Too Careful! Those Frogmen smack suspiciously of Dwarts!"

"The frogmen are not dwarts," said Morgan. "I can assure you of that, but I don't think that's really the issue . . ."

Gobble slapped a piece of paper onto the table with the flat of his hand, "I hate to interrupt the discussion," he started, "but I'd like you to look over my recommendations if you really want to come out on top." He shifted his eyes from face to face. "And I who have lived the space of five worlds know the only sure way to come out on top!"

Morgan picked up the paper. It was an itemized note. Tilting it towards the rain-orb, he read aloud:

You can win this war, if I am granted:

- (1) A ready supply of leather.
- (2) Twenty-one more dwarfs.
- (3) One night in which to work.

Morgan wrinkled up his brow. "Well, you've all heard Gobble's suggestions. What do you think?"

"I like them," nodded Artha. "I was going to suggest something similar. It seems like a lot more fun than just zapping Clod sight unseen!"

"Mister Costick?"

"I approve of the Recommendations on Principle," he began, "because They are Anti-Clod, but I Wonder at the Advisability of Procuring More Souls from the Dead. I do not wish to seem an Enemy to Progress, but I myself believe, after observing the Results of our Liberal Experiment with the Minstrel, that Calling up the Dead is a Bad Idea. Mister Stackhouse's Head, I might say, is not Screwed on Straight! He does not seem to be as . . . Reverent, as he used to be."

Artha was about to say something, but Flesherton Costick held up his finger and trundled on. "I do not wish to make Distinctions, but I myself floated to this Land of Gore at the same Time as did the King. And That, I think, Must Mean Something! My point being: can we Afford to Overrrun Our Land with Dwarfs? Nothing personal, Mister Gobble, you understand!"

"I understand just how you feel," smiled Gobble.

"Don't forget that you floated here in the form of a chamberpot," Artha blurted out. "And can we really afford not to bring the dwarfs in? Twenty-one more dwarfs will hardly overrun such a large country as this, and on the other hand, they can save us from the frogmen overrunning it. You must consider that!"

"Happy, what do you think?" said Morgan.

Happy scuffled his feet together under the table and smiled sadly. "Well, I don't think . . . er, that is, I've never seen the frogpipple . . . er, heard the frogpipple say . . . anything like they said today. I really don't know what to say . . . or what's going on. I don't really like any of those ideas."

"What?" cried Artha and Flesherton Costick together. They both jumped up and started pointing fingers and pounding tables. "Don't like our ideas?"

"One cannot just give up . . .," steamed the white-haired old man.

"Those frogmen attacked me once . . .," added Artha, a little bit louder.

" . . . and Wallow in the Bog of Despair. Our Interests . . ."

" . . . and that green knight, that animal, insulted me once . . ."

" . . . and Our Children's Interests . . ."

" . . . and I'm not one to stand for that . . ."

" . . . are at Stake! We must be . . ."

" . . . That smart-aleck toad and his King Clod are going . . ."

" . . . Decisive! Someone must Weed . . ."

" . . . to get it! Wow! I really mean get it!"

" . . . the Garden!"

"I VOTE," chimed the pair in unison, "YES TO GOBBLE'S SUGGESTIONS!"

And a silence as heavy as a stovelid weighed down upon the little group in the royal bedchamber.

"Well . . .," said Morgan at long last, "how do you vote, Happy?"

"I really don't want to vote."

"Me neither!"

Flesherton Costick cleared his throat and aimed his stomach around the room. "The Tally stands at Three to Zero in Favour of Accepting the Proposal. Do either of you wish to vote upon Second Thought?"

"I guess not," said Morgan listlessly.

"Fine, Fine," smiled Flesherton Costick, rubbing his hands together. "Just Fine!" His face whitened again with teeth and he coughed modestly. "I want you to know, Gentlemen and Lady, that I have Passed the Better Part of the Late Afternoon in Worthwhile Meditation. Thanks to my Past Experience as a Good Fellow, I came up with some Handy and Inspirational Catechism that would Benefit the Whorsepipple Immensely!"

The four other members of council looked blankly around at each other.

"Shoot," said Morgan. "Let's hear it."

"Well," Flesherton Costick began quite coyly, "First I think it is Wise to Alert the Whorsepipple to the Animality of our Enemy the Dwart . . . er, the Frogman. This can be done by Describing his Daily Diet. As we all Know, We Are What We Eat! The Frogman drinks very Filthy Water in the Swamps, so we may construe his Favorite Beverage to be (if you Pardon the Expression) Urine. And that does not say Very Much for the Frogman!" Pausing on this note, he looked around to see how Morgan and the rest were taking all this. No one said anything, so he went on.

"The Food he eats can not be Very Clean, as he lives in the Most Unsanitary of Places, so we may describe him as . . . uh, Very Unclean! Anyway, as the Best of the Whorsepipple are sometimes Apt to Forget (Nothing Personal, Mister Happy), I took the Liberty to compose a Memorable and Benificent Piece of Verse . . . which goes something like this . . ."

The white-haired man took a deep breath, but then let it out again. "Now, I want you All to Understand that Perhaps the Rhyme is not Quite Perfect and Perhaps the Metre is not Polished Enough, but we can always improve upon that. Anyway, Gentlemen . . ."

He coughed again and began to recite very slowly and clearly.

Pee Soup and Germy Cake
Makes the Frogman's Belly Ache!

Flesherton Costick blinked eagerly around for signs of appreciation or at least, acceptance. A pall of silence made him swallow and turn a shade redder.

"'Makes the Frogman's Belly Ache . . .'?" asked Gobble incredulously. "I'm sorry, but I really don't understand. Why would a frogman eat anything at all if it made his belly ache?"

Flesherton Costick puffed out his chest. "Because . . .," he stated quite solemnly, "because . . . the Frogman has no Decent Standard of Values and, therefore, Knows Not What is Good! And by Extension, Knows Not What is Good for Him! Besides, it is Very Difficult Finding Rhymes in a Very Short Space of Time! Do I answer your question?"

"Rather well . . .," nodded Gobble. A smile twisted across his face. "Perhaps you should go out into the banquet hall right now and start teaching the whorsepipple their Catechism. You can never start too early. ."

"You are Only Too Right, Mister Gobble!" Flesherton Costick furrowed his brow and headed for the door. "Now if you will excuse me, I

will begin Educating the Masses and Uplifting their Morals!" And with a curt bow, he left the councilroom, slamming the door behind him.

"And it might help too, if we uplifted the drawbridges tonight," added Gobble.

"That's a good idea," nodded Morgan. "I never thought of that. Who knows if there will be a sneak attack tonight or not? If I have to fight a war, I'm not going to do it stupidly like the last time." Morgan turned to Gobble. "How could we just walk into battle against all those dwarfs with nothing but trumpets and drums?"

Gobble's unbalanced eyes twinkled across the table. "It beats me how you did it."

"Umm, perhaps we should plan the rest of the details before we go to bed."

"I'll take care of keeping the men together," said Artha from the doorway. "They had better sleep in the hall tonight instead of going home or off to the beach. There's no telling what might happen to them if we send them out in the dark on the eve of a big war!" And before Morgan could agree or disagree, she had swept out of the door and down the hall.

"And I'll look to the armaments," Gobble spoke up, "as soon as you cough up the twenty-one dwarfs I'll need."

"All right," said Morgan, picking up the rain-orb. "We might as well begin as soon as possible. Happy, will you go out and give orders to have the drawbridges drawn? Gobble and I want to attend to the dwarfs. Oh, and would you see that everyone has a blanket and a comfortable place to sleep?"

"Yessir," sighed Happy. "I'll go do that right away . . ."

After Happy had closed the door behind him and his footsteps had faded away down the hall, Morgan leaned over the table to Gobble. "I want to know something," he whispered.

"And what's that?"

"Do you suppose . . . you could possibly whip up any Magic Powder and a few small dwarf-getters?"

The dwarf shook his head regretfully. "We just don't have the mines for raw materials. No saltpetre and sulphur, no Magic Powder. I'm sorry."

"It was only an idea I had . . .," mumbled Morgan. "We'll just forget that I said it." He coughed. "Let's see now, I'll have to have the names of the dwarfs you want."

Gobble sat back and pulled out his pipe. "We'll start off with Aard." Out of a baggy pocket appeared the familiar tin of Gulblarmie.

"Aard?"

"Yes."

And so Morgan set his mind to conjuring up dwarfs who had died in the near and distant past. Dwarf heroes and earth-bowel smoke filled the room where Gobble and Morgan sat sweating and concentrating. It was in this manner that the evening wore on.

glory in the morning

The night picked Morgan up by the heels
and swung him
headlong, headthrobbing
through a maze of clinks
and hammerblows that never fell.

TWO, FOUR, SIX, EIGHT!
WHO DO WE DEPRECIATE?
JOHN CLOD,
THAT'S WHO!

"Don't call on thith guy,"
lisped a marble statue of Roger Mellon.
"I want no more
of your crapped planth and promotionth!
Finally, there'th
no more tableth to wait on,
no more louthy loudmouthth,
no more inthultth!
Jutht lotth and lotth of thleep!"
And the marble turned to salt
in the wind of the rising dawn.

"Morgan! Morgan!"

What is this whirlpool I'm in?

"Morgan! Morgan!"

The mast has snapped off at the deck!

"Morgan! Morgan! Quit kicking! Wake up!"

Where the bartender's
paling memory stood
there now loomed
through veils of chintz
one Alleyne Frogoni,
resplendent
in immobile obsidian.

A small boy, so much younger
than Morgan, a Bubo Grume,
ran up, cobwebs trailing,
and cried, "Mister Frogoni
says he is only too happy
with six feet of puddle,
thankyouverymuch,
so forget it!"

And as the boy tripped circles
as a fading lantern
around its wordless master,
the light on
Alleyne Frogoni's
smiling lips
shifted into a smirk:
and with a sooty fingersnap,
all the world was awake.

Morgan sat up cold and sweating. The covers were knotted around his feet and Melodee was nowhere in sight. The old feeling was back with him: the all-depressing sickness lingered on as an electric hum throughout his body and a woodmill buzz within his head. Then . . .

EAT IT! BEAT IT! BIG FAT FROG!
WE'LL TEACH J.C. TO STAY IN THE BOG!

Dream voices continued to march through the bedroom. The doorway to the balcony was open and regular chants invaded the gloomy regions of sleep like knowing warriors.

Morgan coughed, almost to the point of choking, and struggled out of bed, across the freezing marble out into the sunlight. The world exploded with an immensity of sky, white and jungle. Squinting his eyes against the sharpness, Morgan hung suspended between the blue heavens and the marble underfoot which was as warm as breathing flesh.

"So this is Someday morning," thought the sick king to himself.
"It's finally here at last!"

Morgan, after making his way to the edge of the balcony, leaned over the railing. The castle walls dived deep into the clear water, amber at seeing's greatest depth, and stood firm against the waves. Upon the waves rode the lilypads surrounding Castle Moog. To Morgan's mind they zoomed so unnaturally high and low that he could no longer bear to look at them.

There on the drawbridge, off to his left, were rows upon rows of metal cans, polished and chromed, winking in the sun. Each one was im-

mobile as a peg and armed with a gleaming sword at its girdle's side. The early morning chants that had so disturbed Morgan's dreams filtered from these visored pots and rattled heavensward.

The leader of this singsong was dressed as ever in his tasteful grayflannel suit with the cleaner's bob, and was briskly waving a crooked twig borrowed from some nearby tree. No sooner had Morgan peeked over the railing than had Flesherton Costick stilled his chorus with a few sharp taps upon the shiny helmet closest to him.

"All right! All Right!" he announced. "Here's the King! Let's Warm the Cockles of his Royal Heart by Running through the Bywords we have been Practicing So Diligently All Morning! One-two-three . . ."

Morgan gripped the railing for support as a concert of tinny voices blared out its little song. The words rattled around like bullets in his spinning head.

THE ONLY GOOD TOAD IS A DEAD TOAD!
THE ONLY GOOD FROG IS A DEAD FROG!
THE ONLY GOOD KING IS A DEAD KING,
IF HE IS THE KING OF THE BOG!

"Very effective," Morgan smiled weakly down at his soldiers. "Very effective . . ." He raised his hand in salute, but the sudden movement spun the world around. His knees twisted like spaghetti under him and brought him crashing down beside the little pool. A wave of nausea washed over him time upon time. He retched miserably, but nothing would come up, heave after heave.

"The King is sick this morning?" broke in a voice that Morgan recognized to be Gobble's. "That's too bad. That's really too bad. And on his big day, the day of Victory and Glory too!"

Morgan looked up to see Gobble and Blung standing in the doorway. After splashing some water around his mouth and on the back of his neck, Morgan felt a little better, well enough in any event to crawl over to the couch on the other side of the pool and inch his way up onto it.

Gobble came forward, put his foot up on the edge of the couch to rest his elbow upon his knee. He looked down into Morgan's eyes which were half-swollen shut and very lacklustre.

"Tsk.tsk!" Gobble shook his head.

"Do you happen to have any more of those Magic Pills?" asked Morgan between stomach spasms.

"No I'm sorry," answered Gobble with a sympathetic smile. "You had the last one yesterday. There's no more Magic Pills."

"Ooog! I sure could stand one. That rain-orb is too much . . ."

"Chin up!" laughed the dwarf brightly. "Time will cure all, as our friend Costick would say. I've just come to tell you that now that we've completed our end of the deal, we're moving on. I think we dwarfs will be happier in the mountains. Beyond the lake lie the Mountains of the Moon, and that's where we're headed. Mountains are for mining and that's the life of the dwarf. So, King Morgan and lot, I wish you well in your endeavour. Fight on! Ta ta! Come on, Blung!"

With a tip of his hat, Gobble moved off with Blung at his side. They pushed by Melodee who was coming out onto the balcony with a steaming bowl of soup in her hands.

"My," she exclaimed after the inner door had slammed shut, "they certainly were in a hurry, weren't they? Anyway, I made some honey soup to fix you up. You were kicking and moaning all night long! Can you sit up a bit?"

Melodee's presence helped to calm Morgan's quivering, and the soup, as well, lent him a little strength. Within minutes, he was sitting up and chatting. He was not completely better, but better than before.

"Artha sends up a message, Morgan, that you're to come down soon and review the troops. Do you feel much like moving?"

Morgan burped. "Oh, I think I can move around, but I don't think that I'll be able to leave for any battles today."

"I don't think you should even think of going into the Bog," said Melodee, spooning the last of the soup into Morgan. "You're too weak and I don't want you to go."

"I guess it's not really necessary that I do go. Kings don't have to go if they don't want to."

"That's right! Now let's get you into your clean clothes."

As Morgan was being dressed in his new velvet bellbottoms and frilly pink shirt, his eyes wandered lazily around the room. All of a sudden, his heart leapt into his mouth. "Something is wrong!" he thought. "Something is missing!" His eyes raced all around the room.

There were his mirrors and brushes on the bureau and his clothing in his closet. The map was on the table, but . . . "The rain-orb!" he shouted aloud. "The rain-orb is gone!"

Melodee continued folding his dirty clothes and putting them neatly in a stack to be sent to the laundry. "It's around here somewhere. Maybe it's in your cedar chest."

He rushed to the box on his dresser and flung it open. It was empty save for a single black ticket that was only good for one ride on the black barge. "It's not there! Where can it be?"

"Maybe I put it into one of the drawers. I remember something of putting it somewhere. Or was that the night before?"

"Somebody took it!" shouted Morgan and ran to the door. "Stop Gobble and the dwarfs!" he bellowed out into the empty, echoing hallway. "My rain-orb has been stolen!"

An attendant, a little whorsepipple whose face Morgan had never seen before, came running up. "Is something amiss, your majesty?"

"Raise the drawbridges! Stop the dwarfs from leaving! They stole my rain-orb!"

"I'm sorry, your majesty, but Gobble and his dwarfs have left already. They raided the pantry and were away before we could stop them. Is there anything else, your majesty? I have to help Artha load up the boats."

Morgan had fallen against the doorframe. He shook his head. "No, no . . . Tell Artha that I'll be down presently to see to whatever it was she wanted."

"To review the troops, your majesty."

"Yes, yes. Now hurry along."

"As you wish, your majesty. I will convey the message."

And the attendant exited backwards, bowing all the way, until he had disappeared down the long, dim hall and around the corner to the stairway.

" . . . and these are our horsemen," indicated Artha with a sweep of her arm. She was outfitted in a cute, rather tight-fitting coat of mail. She had on Luigilot's darkglasses again.

Morgan nodded from where he sat on the back of Mary the mule. "These new suits or armour certainly do look a lot more substantial than the ones I saw yesterday."

"Oh, they are," agreed Artha enthusiastically. "And much more comfortable too!"

"Aren't they rather heavy?"

"Yes, they are," she admitted. "But that's why we had this machine up ahead built for us." She pointed to a solid construction of heavy logs and ropes. There were gears and levers clustered about on one side leading up to a series of pulleys that hung down from a crossbeam. "The knight is strapped into this harness," explained Artha, standing up in her stirrups, "and a couple of squires crank this handle around to lift him up into the air. Then his charger is led underneath. The knight is dropped and he's ready to go! Simple as mud pie. I designed it myself and had some of Luigi's servants whip it up!"

"I see," said Morgan as he studied the machine with well-meant interest. "I see . . ."

"And this brings us to the next section of the army: the retainers." She showed Morgan a motley collection of whorsepipple that were waiting patiently under the hot sun. Their faces were happy, sad, anxious, bored and some, it seemed to Morgan, were still rather sleepy. "These people are the squires to the knights you just reviewed. There are five squires to every knight to help with the arming, maintenance, cleaning, cooking, pouring the wine and all the other troublesome duties of war. We can pass over them. They're not very exciting."

As Morgan followed Artha onto further wonders, he looked back at the retainers. They all looked up at him as he passed as if he were not real, but some extraordinary creature from another world, some thing or body beyond their knowing.

Morgan was dragged away from his private thoughts by Artha's voice.

"These wagons here contain perhaps the most decisive elements in our army." Artha paused and slapped the yellow wall of the lead wagon. "In these wagons, we have spare weapons, swords, spears, lances, daggers, axes and the like, as well as replacement parts for the men's armour. There are hammers and anvils for repairs, not to mention a host of other goodies that Gobble whipped up for us."

Artha held up in front of her a little pot that looked like it might have once been a shaving mug. She withdrew the pestle that was lodged tightly in its mouth and . . .

FOOF!

Morgan almost tumbled onto his head as Mary jumped sideways and back from the hissing fire that danced and wriggled in Artha's fist. "This," she announced proudly, her darkglasses flashing with the flame, "is grigg fire. Gobble tried to make some Magic Powder for us by boiling down griggs and sprats he caught in the river, but he could only come up with this. But it works rather effectively in its own little way. When the air touches it, it bursts into flame!" Artha smiled into the fire and waved it around. "We have jartles of the stuff. You throw one on a tree or wall and BOOM! No more tree or wall, just a heap of smouldering cinders! Gobble said we could use it to burn the shrubbery the frogmen might be hiding in. Good idea, hunh?" She put the pestle back in the mug and the fire puffed out as instantly as it began. A small curl of smoke twisted up from the pot as Artha set it aside.

Morgan nodded rather carefully and had to agree that the grigg fire seemed to be very effective. "What else have you to show me? My head is starting to spin again. It must be the sun."

"That's too bad," frowned Artha. "But it doesn't matter. The last section of the army is nothing but cockwagons, the tents and the women. Not really too much spectacle. But I was wondering . . . Do you think you could make a little speech before we shove off?"

"You're taking everything on boats?"

"Yes."

"Do we have enough of them?"

"I think so. If you want to go and rest up, I'll supervise the loading and then you can come down when you're ready to go."

"Didn't you hear?" Morgan tilted his eyes away from the sun. "I'm not going. I feel too sick to be moving around, charging through the Bog and all."

"Not going?" Artha exploded. "Do you want to miss out on all the fun? Think of it: the chivalry, the glory, the prizes of war, the excitement! Do you really want to stay here in that drafty old castle?"

"I think I'd best. I'd just be in the way. Anyway kings don't have to go trooping off on every little battle, do they?"

Artha shrugged her shoulders. "I guess not. Have it your own way, but you could rest up on the voyage. We're not going to start fighting the minute we leave, you know."

"You'll have full command," smiled Morgan, "if that's all right with you."

"Sure, sure! That's understood. But I'll miss having you around to bumble things up."

"The castle will need somebody around to bumble things up, now that practically everyone is leaving."

"I guess so," smiled Artha. She slapped her horse on the neck. "Well, you go and rest up and I'll see to the loading. But you will make a speech?"

"Sure," nodded Morgan. "If you want me to. I'll go think one up."

"Make it a good one! A lot of fire in it!"

So Morgan and Artha parted. Mary carried Morgan back into the castle, while Artha immediately began giving orders and shouting for people to hurry up with whatever it was that they were supposed to be doing.

The river in front of the balcony was aswim with hundreds of crafts, both big and small. There were troop ships, horse boats, wagon barges and floating cookshacks. Their gay and colorful sails provided quite a sight for Morgan's tired eyes. He held himself up by gripping the railing and he looked all over the harbour. He tried to search out familiar faces, Happy, Old Tom, anybody.

On board the raciest of the boats were crowded the knights in all their splendid magnificence. But the nooning sun was shining down so brilliantly upon their well-polished helmets that Morgan found it difficult to look directly at them, let alone see any one person that he might know. He squinted into the dazzling flashes just the same, but tears came to his eyes and he had to give it up.

Out of the swarming mass of colour Artha appeared in a trim little ship paddled by four whorsepipple. Beside her on the first seat sat Sir Luigilot of the Lagoon. He had somehow come across an extra pair of sunglasses as they both were wearing them. Pale within their armour they could be mistaken for twins--but Artha had black hair to Luigi's white.

"Are you all packed up and ready to leave now?" Morgan shouted down to the boat that had just come up beneath his balcony.

"Yes," cried Artha, cupping her hands around her mouth. "All present and accounted for, except Happy. Have you seen him around?"

"No, I can't say that I have. I haven't seen him since last night."

"Luigi says that he saw him creeping along the hall with his bowling ball bag towards the drawbridge late last night."

"Well," said Morgan, "he probably didn't want to fight. I really don't blame him."

"Well, he's not going to save the world by running away from it," Artha shouted back. "But we can get along quite well without him. Luigi says we can recruit a lot of good material up close to Lake Ygena. We're going to stop there for a break and pick all the lake pipples up that we can. So are you going to make your speech?"

"I'm ready whenever you are."

Artha turned around to face the flotilla at her back and let go with a shout that carried clear across the river. "Okay everybody! Shut up! King Morgan is going to make a farewell speech to cheer you all up!" She sat down next to Luigilot and signalled Morgan by joining her thumb and index finger.

"Ahem," Morgan coughed behind his hand. He could feel Melodee beside him. "There are," he began, "many things I would like to talk over with all of you. But time forbids it. Here we are threatened by a distant people in a distant land and you must all rush off to protect our homeland, the beloved Moog."

He spoke quite quietly, but loud enough to be heard by those in the furthest boats that were bobbing and rocking on the upstream waves. When he paused for breath, a hot and humid silence had rushed in to fill the gap. An invisible hand suddenly gripped his heart and Morgan wondered what all of those unseen faces before him were thinking. So he quickly went on.

"I want you to remember a few things when you are out there in the Bog fighting not only the enemy, but the mosquitoes, the heat and disease. I have been in battles before and I don't like them. I think that all of you are somewhat like me: I don't like fighting and I never will like fighting. But I believe that as soon as this little misunderstanding with the frogpipple is cleared up, we will all live once more in peace, harmony and happiness. Just like we did before."

Again he paused and tried to gauge the crowd's reaction. "Do they understand what I'm trying to say," he worried to himself. "I don't want this war, but it seems there's no way out . . . How can I tell them?"

From up the river came a far and distant cry of some bird. It made Morgan feel very lonely.

"There is another thing that I want you to remember. We are in this war and I want to win it. But what I want to say is that I do not want to be the king who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended dominion. I want to be the king who educated young children to the wonders of their world!

"I want to be the king who helped to feed the hungry and helped to prepare them to be tax-payers instead of tax-eaters!

"I want to be the king who helped the poor find their own way and who protected the right of every whorsepipple to vote in every election (which I will tell you about when you get back).

"I want to be the king who helped to end hatred among his fellow creatures and who prompted love among the pipple of all races and all regions and all parties!

"I want," Morgan boomed out, his finger frozen in the air before him, "to be the king who helped to end war among the brothers of this land. We are fighting a war to bring an end to war!"

He was about to go on, but a throaty cheer thundered out from the harbour. Every knight, squire, pageboy, cook and washerwoman cried out and filled the air with agreement. Everypipple stamped his feet on the wooden bottoms of the boats and the deep booming that resulted carried across the vast river to scare up a family of herons that was feeding in a forest of papyrus reeds.

The knights beat their swords upon their shields and rattled their metal-plated arms in the air. Those that had hats threw them up into the wind. Flags and streamers floated and waved from every boat. For a full minute, the army before their king kept up its joyful roar.

Then Artha stood up again and steadied herself on Luigi's shoulder. "All right, whorsepipple!" she bellowed. "We've got a war to win! Prepare to move out!" Then she turned around to Morgan and waved a green silk scarf. "We'll see you soon. Probably not Mudday or Toolday, but no later than next Someday. It'll be a short war, short and sweet. Thanks

a load for the speech. I can't say that I really agree with all that peace crap, but you managed to turn everybody on and that's what counts. It'll last them all the way to the Bog! So, thanks again and ta ta!"

And so Artha turned her attention to the waterfront.

From their vantage point on the balcony Morgan and Melodee watched the tight order of boats break up into yet an even tighter order. One by one they flitted, borne by the wind, up the River Nar until they disappeared around the first bend for who-knows-how-long. Artha, long after she had vanished from sight, could be heard shouting orders and keeping the boats in line. Carrying across the water, the occasional clunk of metal on wood followed the last of the voices. And finally, even those sounds passed away into the wind as well.

"Well," said Morgan as he walked away from the railing and took up a relaxed position on the couch beside the pool, "I believe we have a quiet day ahead of us. What say we have something to eat? I'm hungry after all that shouting."

Melodee ducked into the castle to return in a minute with a small basket of oranges. Sitting at Morgan's side, she picked out the juiciest-looking one and began peeling it for him. As she did so, she tossed the peelings into the little pool where they splashed up a growing series of rings, one within the other. The blue and white water-lotuses twinkled as the waves passed under them. Then, after the bombardment had stopped, they settled back to float serenely on the stilling surface.

As he chewed his half of the orange, Morgan absently fished about in the water with a reed that had been blown up onto the balcony by the

windstorm of two nights previous. It reminded him of eons past, of fishing, of old Murdoch, and even of chopping down trees in the Timberwold. All of a sudden he sat up on the couch.

"I'm going fishing!"

"That's a good idea," agreed Melodee. "It'll be relaxing for you, won't it? And if you catch a fish, you know that you'll have a nice sizzling-hot meal tonight."

So Morgan and Melodee lived happily even after. And whatever are the sweet joys of life, they enjoyed them. And you, who set aside this book, remember their tasks which kept them busy, very content and always in good health. She spun, sang, laughed and danced as he cozily thought, "What a life: waiting for a fish!" But joy time to him was to land one.

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